ALL STORIES NEW . . . NO REPRINTS

RANCH ROMANCES

25c

FIRST JANUARY NUMBER

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FEATURING

THE WOMAN AT WAGONWHEEL

By Ray Gaulden

QUEEN OF JACOB'S KINGDOM

By Seven Anderton

Reducing Specialist Says:

LOSE WEIGHT Where It Shows Most REDUCE MOST ANY PART OF THE BODY WITH

ELECTRIC Spot Reducer

Spot Reducer

Relaxing • Soothing Penetrating Massage

UNDERWRITERS LABORATORY APPROVED

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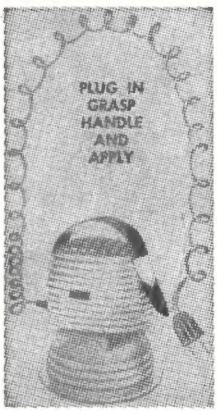

Take pounds off — keep slim and trim with Spot Reducer! Remarkable new invention which uses one of the most effective reducing methods employed by masseurs and turkish baths—MASSAGE!

TAKE OFF EXCESS WEIGHT!

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ST. ..... R. D. ..... BOX .....

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WILSON CHEMICAL COMPANY
Dept. TC-3I, Tyrone, Pa.

33rd Year
OF PUBLICATION

FIRST
JANUARY NUMBER
December 28, 1956
Volume 202, No. 2

RANCH ROMANCES

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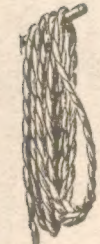

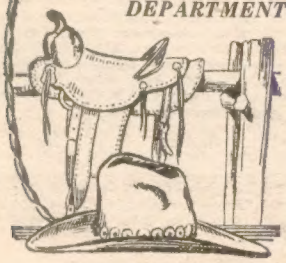

HELEN TONO
Editor

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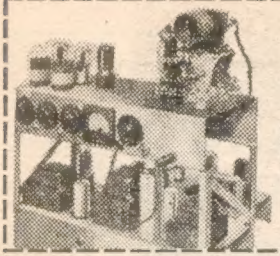

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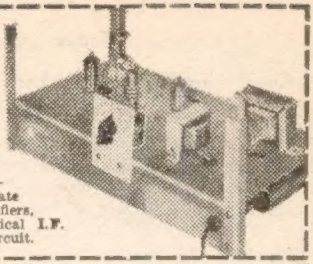

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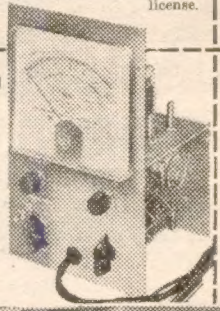

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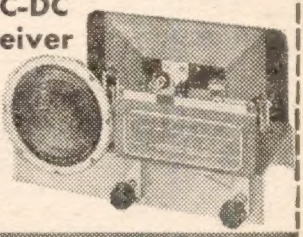

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APPROVED MEMBER, NATIONAL HOME STUDY COUNCIL

Outdoor Guy

Dear Editor:

Could a lonely farm hand have his letter published in your column? I'm 28 years old, 6'1" tall, weigh 175 lbs., and have dark brown hair and eyes. My hobbies consist mostly of outdoor sports such as hunting, fishing, skating and snowshoeing. I enjoy a good book when I have the time, and I'm also quite fond of hillbilly and popular music. Would like to correspond with young ladies between the ages of 20 and 26, from all over the states.

CHUCK WILSON
Route #1, Deforest, Wisconsin
c/o B. E. Bowers

Guitar Player

Dear Editor:

I think it's a great idea to be part of a correspondence club, and so I would like to join your ranks. I am 20 years old, 6' tall, weigh 160 lbs., and have red hair and brown eyes. My only hobby is playing the guitar. I also enjoy classical, hillbilly and popular music. Would enjoy hearing from anyone, and will answer all letters.

DON REED
117½ E. 8th
Lawrence, Kansas

New Reader

Dear Editor:

I am a new reader of RANCH ROMANCES and enjoy the magazine very much. I am in the Air Force, finishing my last year of service, and would like to make some new acquaintances. I'm 22 years old, 5'11" tall, and have brown hair and eyes. My hobby is woodworking, and I also enjoy movies, dances and some outdoor sports. Will answer all letters, especially from girls in the Mid-West.

A/2C GEORGE R. KRAFT
Headquarters Sqd., 28th A.B.G.
Ellsworth A.F.B., South Dakota

Waiting to Hear

Dear Editor:

I'd like to enter my plea for pen pals from all over the country. I'm 30 years old, 5'2½" tall, and am a brunette with green-gray eyes. I like to read and go to movies and dances. I also collect picture postcards. I'll be looking for a filled mail box, so please don't disappoint me. First come, first answered.

ELORA JANE WILLIAMS
1125 Mulberry Street
Waterloo, Iowa

Our Northern Neighbor

Dear Editor:

I'm 26 years old, single, weigh 150 lbs., and have black hair and brown eyes. My interests include dancing, hillbilly music, reading, movies and TV. Would like to hear from ladies between the ages of 18 and 28. I promise to answer all letters, and will exchange snaps.

ROBERT BAUGHMAN
44 Owaissa Street
St. Thomas
Ontario, Canada

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 32 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Likes a Variety of Things

Dear Editor:

I'm a lonely G.I. who doesn't receive much mail. I love to write letters and would like to hear from some young ladies. I'm 5'7" tall, weigh 140 lbs., have brown hair and eyes, and am 29 years old. Will exchange photos with all who write to me. My interests are varied; I like practically everything.

PFC. MICHAEL J. PELSANG, RA 42156049
1st Sig. Co., 1st Inf. Division
Ft. Riley, Kansas

No Bad Habits

Dear Editor:

I am 44 years old, 5'7" tall, and have brown hair and blue eyes. I do not smoke or drink. I am a male attendant in an old folk's home. Would like to hear from the ladies, and promise to send them my photo.

MARVIN C. MYERS
Box 341
Abilene, Kansas

Misses His Mother

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of RANCH ROMANCES for a long time and usually can't wait until a new issue comes out. I am 48 years old, 5'8½" tall, weigh 178 lbs., and have dark hair and eyes. I lost my mother recently and am now all alone. Will answer anyone who writes to me, so please let me hear from you.

JAMES DIXON
418 North Main Street
Webb City, Missouri

Ailing Guy

Dear Editor:

I'm an ex-G.I. who is not in too good health at the moment, and therefore I find myself lonesome and blue a lot of the time. I am 33 years old, 5'7" tall, weigh 139 lbs., and have brown hair and gray eyes. Will be looking forward to hearing from people, will answer every letter, and will also exchange pictures.

FRANCIS GORMAN
1513 Elmwood Avenue
Folcroft, Pennsylvania

Young and Willing

Dear Editor:

I would like my letter to appear on your "Air Mail" page. I am 20 years old, 5'9" tall, and have blonde hair and hazel eyes. Would like to hear from men and women between the ages of 20 and 26. I especially like music and friendly people. Hope you fill my mail box.

SANDRA SMITH

9 Main Street
Binghamton, New York

Likes New Friends

Dear Editor:

I would like very much to get into the "Our Air Mail" column. I am a widow with two children, am 36 years old, 5'1" tall, weigh 114 lbs., and have auburn hair and blue eyes. Would enjoy hearing from almost anyone, as I would like to acquire a whole lot of new friends.

MRS. PEGGY BICE

726 W. Liberty Street
Mexico, Missouri

Lonely Bachelor

Dear Editor:

I hope you can find room in your column for a lonely bachelor. I'm 33 years old, 6'3" tall, and weigh 195 lbs. I live in the country and own my home. Would like to hear from ladies between the ages of 25 and 35 years. Will exchange pictures if so desired.

JIMMIE JENNINGS

Liberty, Texas
General Delivery

Wants Letters

Dear Editor:

Would appreciate hearing from people between the ages of 50 and 60. I am a widow, 46 years old, 5'½" tall, weighing 120 lbs., with brown-gray hair and hazel eyes. Hope that I receive loads of letters.

MAE HARTWELL

War, West Virginia

Town With a History

Dear Editor:

Hope that I make the grade and get into "Our Air Mail." I'm 21 years old, single, 5'10½" tall, weigh 160 lbs., and have brown hair and blue eyes. To anyone who writes to me I promise to tell the history of my town, Saltville, and how it got its name.

JAMES OTIS CHAPMAN

P.O. Box 52
Saltville, Virginia

Enjoys Writing

Dear Editor:

I'm a lonesome young lady, formerly from Arkansas but now residing in Kansas. I'm 17 years old, 5'5" tall, weigh 117 lbs., and have blonde hair and blue eyes. My likes include music, especially hillbilly music. I also enjoy swimming, fishing and hunting. Would particularly be interested in hearing from servicemen between the ages of 17 and 27.

DIANE LARIMERE

General Delivery
Leon, Kansas

Far From Home

Dear Editor:

This is the first time I've written to your magazine and I sincerely hope you print my letter. I'm a G.I. stationed in Okinawa, and so would like a lot of pen pals. I'm 21 years old, 5'9" tall, weigh 165 lbs., and have blond hair and blue eyes. My likes include baseball and hillbilly music. So come on, guys and gals, write to me and I promise to answer all of you.

SP-2 CECIL D. McDONALD

RA 13436909
P.O. Box 24
APO 331
San Francisco, California

Hillbilly Fan

Dear Editor:

I'm hoping that there are a lot of hillbilly fans who would like to correspond with a lonely girl of 28. I stand 5' tall and have light red hair and blue eyes. I like hillbilly music very much, and I also play the guitar and yodel. I'm waiting for a lot of replies to my plea.

GERALDINE CROWE

1004-C Street N.E.
Washington, D. C.

About To Give Up

Dear Editor:

As much as I enjoy reading RANCH ROMANCES, I'm beginning to think that I'll never make your column, as this is my fourth stab at it. I am 17 years old, 5'5" tall, with dark hair and eyes. I live in a small town, where I enjoy painting, listening to music, and participating in all kinds of sports. Will answer all letters promptly.

JO ANN AMOSSO

605 East Second Street
Cle Elum, Washington

Wants To Join

Dear Editor:

I've heard that a lot of people got results by appearing in your column, so now I'd like to join. I'm a logger, living up in the woods, so I have plenty of time to write letters. I'm 6'4" tall, weigh 180 lbs., have light brown hair and blue eyes, and my age is 26. I'll be happy to exchange snapshots.

JAMES READ

General Delivery
Wanna, Oregon

Young Looking

Dear Editor:

Would appreciate your entering my plea on the Air Mail page. I am single, thirty-one years old, but I'm told that I don't look a day over twenty. I have brown hair and blue eyes, stand 5'8½" tall, and weight approximately 150 lbs. Everyone living in or around California please write me, but anyone else is welcome too.

GLENN COLLINS

1005 So. Airport Avenue
Santa Maria, California

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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

FOR a half hour after robbing a taxicab driver of his watch and $8, a holdup man told the cabbie his troubles. Then it was the cabbie's turn to air his financial woes; and his story was so convincing that the thief not only returned the loot, but added 50 cents of his own so the cabbie could buy himself cigarettes "to calm his nerves."

TWO men ejected from a Grand Rapids, Mich., tavern for fighting were arrested for continuing their brawl outside. Taken to the police station, they asked to be put in the same cell so they could finish the fight. Permission was denied.

A PEDESTRIAN bent on suicide had Oklahoma City, Okla., motorists tearing their hair recently. Angry when a cab driver refused to run over him, he tried to dash into a passing automobile. The startled driver swerved out of the way, but the pedestrian persisted, and finally succeeded in bumping into the side of a moving car. Still unhurt, he was arrested by a passing policeman.

FISHERMEN at Big Lake, Ariz., find that the fish there have unusual tastes, and what's more these tastes change from time to time. Last year the fish would bite on any hook baited with cheese; this year, though, they disdain cheese and can only be caught with marshmallows.

AMBITION was the undoing of an 11-year-old Peoria, Ill., boy who telephoned the police to say that he had been robbed, then tied himself up to make the story convincing. But when police arrived he explained, "I want to be a policeman and I thought a good way to start was on a case I knew something about."

* * *

TWO groceries in Burlington, Ia., got involved in a price war so heated they were paying five cents to each customer who bought a loaf of bread.

FINDING a rattlesnake, a Medora, N. D., saloon owner put it in a glass cage for display in his bar as a "curiosity." When he opened up the next morning he found that eight more little "curiosities" had arrived.

HARASSED by a gopher, a Las Vegas, Nev., farmer dropped a bomb into its hole. But the gopher pushed the bomb back out. When the farmer grabbed the bomb and threw it away, it exploded and set fire to a hay pile. Final score: 12 tons of burned hay, 1 totally unharmed gopher.

SOME people try to avoid bill collectors, but a Clatskanie, Ore., man is advertising for them. He inserted an ad in a local newspaper advising that he is ready to pay all the debts he acquired because of business failures 20 to 30 years ago. So far he's had no takers.

RANCH
FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

PILLARS OF THE SKY

Universal-International makes . . . and remakes . . . history while filming a colorful new cavalry-against-Indian adventure movie

MOVIE history was made during the filming of Universal-International's *Pillars of the Sky*. They had to call out the National Guard to finish it.

It was a sunny Monday morning up in the rugged mountains of eastern Oregon, near LeGrande. The company and crew were all set to film the big battle scene between a small band of white men and a horde of redskins. But the problem was—no redskins. Seventy-five local Indians had been hired and had promised to show up at 8 A.M., on horseback and complete with warpaint.

Unfortunately, however, the timing was bad. For several days previous, the Pendleton Round-Up had been in full swing, and the Indians, being well-heeled from earlier work with the movie company, enjoyed themselves so thoroughly that they just weren't interested in doing battle on Monday morning.

A less experienced director than George Marshall, a veteran of forty years and four hundred pictures in Hollywood, might have had to sit around chewing his fingernails and watching his budget burst, while he waited for the Indians to turn up. But resourceful old-timer Marshall called upon Dave Baum, local Chamber of Commerce president, who had already been put on the production staff just to cope with unforeseen emergencies.

Dave has a nickname and a title which explain how he was able to handle the problem. He's known as Atom Baum in his home town, and he's also Lt. Col. Baum, a battalion commander in the Oregon National Guard. He made a few calls to his buddies of Company E, and within an hour Marshall had more expert horsemen than he could count.

The guardsmen came from farms, ranches, stores, and offices; they lined up for a waist-to-forehead spraying with bronze paint, and then they mounted their horses with ear-splitting, authentic-sounding war whoops. They all had a fine time, and did a good job.

To Director Marshall the guardmen were the real heroes of the movie, but to fans like you and me who see the picture, the hero remains Jeff Chandler, making his third Indians-vs.-Cavalry movie since he gave up being an Indian himself.

Dorothy Malone, who has redecorated herself as a devastating blonde, is the woman in the story. But she is no hand-wringing, helpless heroine. She has left her husband, a cavalry captain, (played by Keith Andes) for love of the sergeant, (Jeff Chandler) but the two men have to join forces to rescue her from the Indians.

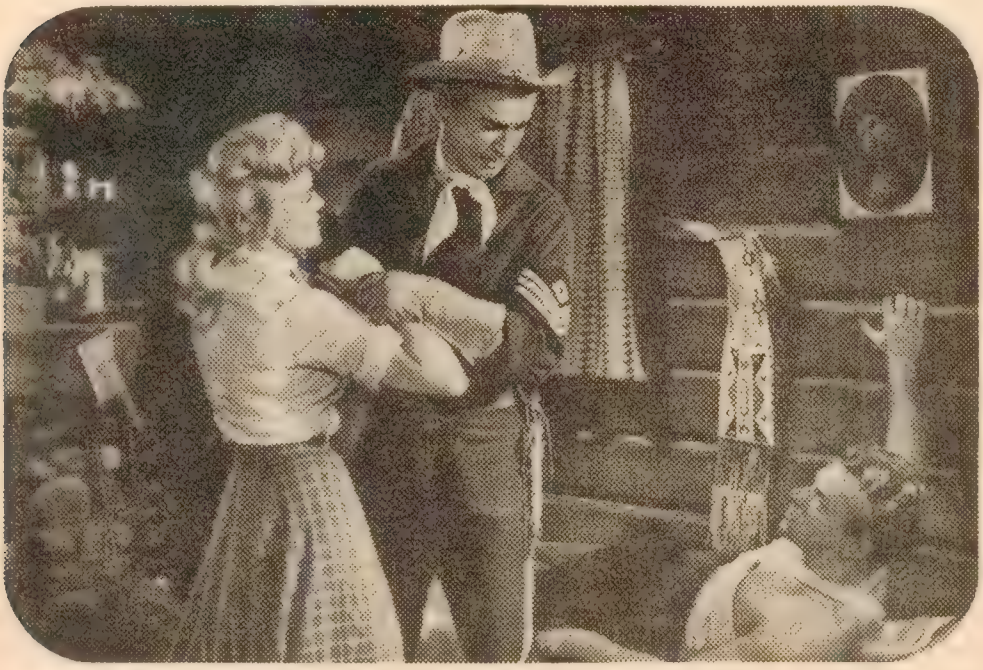
Ward Bond plays a sympathetic character, for once, in *Pillars of the Sky,* dropping his leer and his bullying as he portrays a medical missionary who devotes his life to the Indians.

The film was made in the same part of the country where the real-life story happened. The plot is based on an incident in the greatest campaign ever fought by Indians in the West, when young Chief Joseph moved an entire people, with every possession they could carry, 1700 miles, outfighting and outmaneuvering the U. S. Cavalry until he was within one day of escaping to Canada. But in that last battle the Nez Perce tribe was crushed by heavy artillery, and Chief Joseph himself lies buried among the peaks that he called "Pillars of the Sky."

The movie battle, in which the guardsmen rode to the rescue, is a tremendous one. One of the valiant members of Company E said he hoped he never came any closer to the real thing.

I got a look at the list of arms and equipment used, which gives a pretty good idea of the scale of operation. Besides rifles and cannon, the scene used 500 steel-tipped arrows for whizzing overhead, 100 gauge arrows which run along a steel wire and can be shot straight at the participants in the battle, 100 flip arrows which give the closeup effect of a direct hit, 100 sacks of cork to simulate flying sharpnel and dirt clods, 300 magnesium flares for fire arrows, 1,000 bullet heads, 500 pounds each of black and white powder for fires, and 200 pounds of blasting powder to give the muzzle effect of old-time artillery pieces when fired.

And yet, with all this ammunition banging around, nobody got hurt. People seldom are, in movie battles, which, as the guardsmen of Company E agreed, makes them a lot more fun than the real thing.



Jeff Chandler and Keith Andes fight for Dorothy Malone's love

RICHARD DENNING
WATER BOY

RANCH FLICKER TALK

BEFORE he became an actor, Richard Denning was a Certified Public Accountant, an office manager and finally vice-president of a garment business.

He was 23 when he reached this exalted position, but he admits that he was nevertheless not a genius in the business world.

"I was hardly a self-made man," he says, "because the garment concern belonged to my father, and although he made me work my way up, starting with mailboy, he gave me a little push here and there."

By the time he was 23, however, he'd decided he wasn't interested in garments. His father agreed he'd given the business a fair try, and was willing to let him get started on a theatrical career.

Richard had lived in Hollywood since his family brought him out West from Poughkeepsie, N.Y., when he was two.

"You just can't live in the movie atmosphere all your life," he says, "without wanting to take a shot at being an actor."

Richard enrolled in drama classes at night so he could continue with his commercial career in the daytime. Finally he entered, and won, a radio talent contest, for which the prize was a screen test. The test led to nothing, but a talent scout had seen his radio performance, and a week later arranged for another test at Paramount. In this one, Dick clicked.

That was in 1937. From then until the beginning of the war, he played in some fifty movies, including leads opposite Dorothy Lamour.

But as soon as Pearl Harbor was attacked, Dick dropped his movie career as completely as he'd dropped his business one. He volunteered for the Navy, requesting submarine service. For the next three and a half years he spent his time in the South Pacific.

Before he took off for the Far East Richard married Evelyn Ankers, an actress. Theirs has been a happy marriage of fourteen years' duration. They have one child, a daughter, named Diana.

Dick was the sort of steady, dependable and competent actor that the studios don't forget. In 1945, when he was discharged from the Navy, he had no trouble getting a job. Since then he has worked steadily for Pine and Thomas, independent producers of outdoor films, for 20th Century-Fox, Republic and Columbia. His latest Western, *The Gun That Won the West,* was recently released by Columbia.

For a Navy man, it's not surprising that most of Dick's hobbies are nautical. He loves sailing and swimming, and he likes to catch fish, either with rod and reel or by pursuing them underwater with a spear. He's also fond of bowling and bicycling, both of which, he says, keep him in good shape.

He also plays a good game of tennis, and sticks to a regular schedule of horseback riding. "I've never had a double in a Western," he says proudly, "and I never expect to."

The Dennings own a home in Brentwood, but they're not in it very often. They spend as much time as they can following the seasons in an elaborate, specially built house trailer, which is as comfortable and fully equipped as most modern houses. In the winter they head for Palm Springs, and in the summer they drive the trailer to Malibu Beach.

"I'm not saying that the Hollywood climate isn't wonderful," says Dick, "but I hope the Chamber of Commerce won't be mad at me if I admit that some places are a little more wonderful. There's no smog at Palm Springs, for instance."

He works, he says, no more than he wants to. "I like being an actor because it's nice work, it pays well, and it leaves you plenty of time for fun."

Columbia

An ex-Navy man, most of Richard's interests center on the sea

By RAY GAULDEN

Woman at Wagonwheel

LEE FOUGHT two battles for Ann . . . one against rustlers to save her ranch, one against himself to save her marriage

LEE MANAHORN laid his sewing awl down and went to the window of his saddle shop. A tall lean man, he stood there watching the three riders who a moment ago had drawn his attention. He saw them pulling up at a saloon a few doors down the street, Nate Garson and his son, Rich. The other rider was Cody Romay who lived on the outfit next to the Garsons.

Sight of the Garsons caused Manahorn to frown and stirred a vague uneasiness in him. He watched them swing down and wrap their reins around the tie rail. Nate Garson, gaunt and leathery, turned to face the saddle shop and grinned thinly as he eyed the sign over the door.

He knew the girl was close to him

Manahorn looked past him, turning his attention to Rich Garson and Cody Romay. Rich was big and ugly and slow-moving. He went under the rack and Cody followed. Cody was young, not much more than a kid, Manahorn thought. But he wore a gun and had a tough, cocky look about him.

Rich Garson said something to his father, then shrugged and tramped into the saloon. Cody Romay, hitching up his gunbelt, tagged after Rich. But Nate Garson remained beside the hitch-rack, still looking at the saddle shop. After a moment, he spat into the dust and started across the street.

Lee Manahorn left the window and went back to the saddle he had been working on. He was using a leather punch when Nate Garson came in and stopped beside the doordoorway. The gaunt man's eyes wandered a while before he spoke.

"You always did like fooling with leather, Lee."

"It's safer than fooling with guns," Manahorn said without glancing up from his work.

Garson smiled dimly. "Does it pay as well?"

"Enough to suit me."

Garson came over and inspected the saddle, nodding his head in appreciation. "Maybe I'll have you make one like that for me one of these days, Lee. Something real fancy with a lot of silver on it."

Manahorn, his fingers still busy, said, "Figuring on coming into some money, Nate?"

"Maybe."

"The last time I saw you and Rich, you were scratching to get three meals a day."

Resentment flickered in Garson's lead-gray eyes, and then it was gone and his thin smile returned. "Sometimes a man's luck changes."

Manahorn glanced up and then went on working. He said, "You're off your stomping grounds, Nate. Always did your trading over at Pine City and stayed out of Renaldo."

"That was because of Rich. I wanted him to stay away from whisky and women, but he's growed up now and I can't hold him down any longer."

Manahorn glanced up again, thinking, you're lying like hell, Nate. You stayed away from this town because John Ballard told you to, because you were afraid of him. But now Ballard's dead and you figure you don't have to worry anymore.

Garson stood there, eyeing the saddle, running his hand over the pommel. He said, "I never could savvy you running out on us hill folks, Lee."

"After Dad died," Manahorn said soberly, "there wasn't any reason to stay."

Nate Garson's eyes lifted and settled on Manahorn's face. "So you came to the valley and went to work for Wagonwheel. You signed on with the man all of us hated." He shook his head. "And I always kind of figured you was one of us."

Manahorn met the hill man's accusing stare, and said, "You're the only one I know of who had it in for John Ballard, Nate."

Garson said in a low, bitter tone, "Ballard drove me out, him and his hired guns, and built himself a big spread on grass that was mine."

"Ballard was here first," Manahorn said. "Long before you came."

"It was open range. Ballard didn't own it."

There was hate in Garson's eyes, a wicked flame that had burned through the years. He had brooded over it, Manahorn knew, and sworn to get even. But the hill man had waited too long, because now John Ballard was dead.

Garson caught himself then, and relaxing, turned to survey the shop.

"You've got a real nice place here, Lee, but a man won't ever get rich working with his hands."

Manahorn didn't answer.

Garson took his time walking to the door. There he turned to look back. "I'll drop in again one of these days and see you about making that saddle for me."

He was gone then and Manahorn frowned, wondering what was going on in Nate Garson's warped mind. Manahorn had been raised on the outfit next to the Garson place. He'd gone to school with Rich, but they'd never gotten along after Manahorn refused to help steal some of John Ballard's cows.

Laying his punch down, Manahorn's hand went to his head, touching the old wound that had almost cost him his life. He recalled the night he had left the hills and how his horse

had fallen on a cut bank. Manahorn had been thrown from the saddle, and his head had hit sharp rock.

He'd have died that night, he thought, if John Ballard's son, Gil, hadn't found him and taken him to a doctor. After that he had lived with the Ballards on the big Wagonwheel outfit, staying there until Gil married Ann. Then Manahorn had left, because he couldn't stand it any longer.

Shaking the dark mood from him, he glanced at his watch and saw that it was time for dinner. He got his Stetson and left the shop, turning up the street toward the Red Bird Café. The sign over the Lucky Lady drew his attention, and he gazed somberly at the saloon, thinking that Gil had waited long after his father's death to go into something that was more to his liking than a ranch.

While Manahorn was sitting at a corner table in the café, waiting for his order, Ann Ballard came in. She paused for a moment, serious brown eyes searching the room until she saw him. Then the girl moved down the row of tables.

Sight of her stirred the old longing in Manahorn, and he knew it would always be this way. He loved her in spite of the fact that she was married to another man. She was tall and slender, with hair to match her eyes. Not really beautiful, he thought, watching her approach the table. Not the kind to hold a man's eye when she passed. You had to know her, see her smile, and hear her laughter and feel her warmth.

"Hello, Lee."

He stood up, smiling. "Howdy, Ann. Have a seat."

She didn't return his smile, and he noticed there were troubled shadows in her eyes that hadn't been there the last time he saw her.

When the waitress came with a menu, Ann said, "Just a cup of coffee. I've already had dinner."

IT WAS the first time he had seen her, except from a distance, in months. He wondered if she realized how much her presence disturbed him, and he thought, there's more than the table between us.

"How're things at Wagonwheel?" he asked.

"Not good."

He looked closely at her. "Trouble?"

"Yes, we're losing stock."

Manahorn frowned. "I saw Gil yesterday. He didn't say anything about it."

"We weren't sure until last night. Gil said he would see the sheriff this morning, but he didn't think it would do any good. You know how Ben Doyle is. He doesn't get far from town any more."

Manahorn took a sip of coffee.

Ann said in a low, troubled tone, "Gil's going to see you today, Lee. He says you can stop the rustling if anyone can. I tried to tell him that you have a business here to look after, but it's hard for Gil to think of anyone but himself."

She was right, Manahorn thought. John Ballard had been too good to his only son, spoiled him, given him too much money to throw away. Irresponsible, that was Gil. But he had a winning smile and a way about him.

Ann leaned forward, her face serious. "I was hoping to see you before Gil did, Lee."

"Why?

"Because I want you to turn him down."

Manahorn sat there looking at her, remembering the first time he'd seen her, a girl whose folks had been killed in a flash flood. When the bank took over the small outfit, Ann came to work as housekeeper for John Ballard. The rancher had been good to her, treated her like a daughter. And he had wanted her to marry his son.

"When you're in a man's debt," Manahorn said, "it's hard to turn him down."

"Wagonwheel belongs to Gil now, Lee. It's his responsibility—not yours. And it's time Gil was learning that he can't expect others to look after his interests."

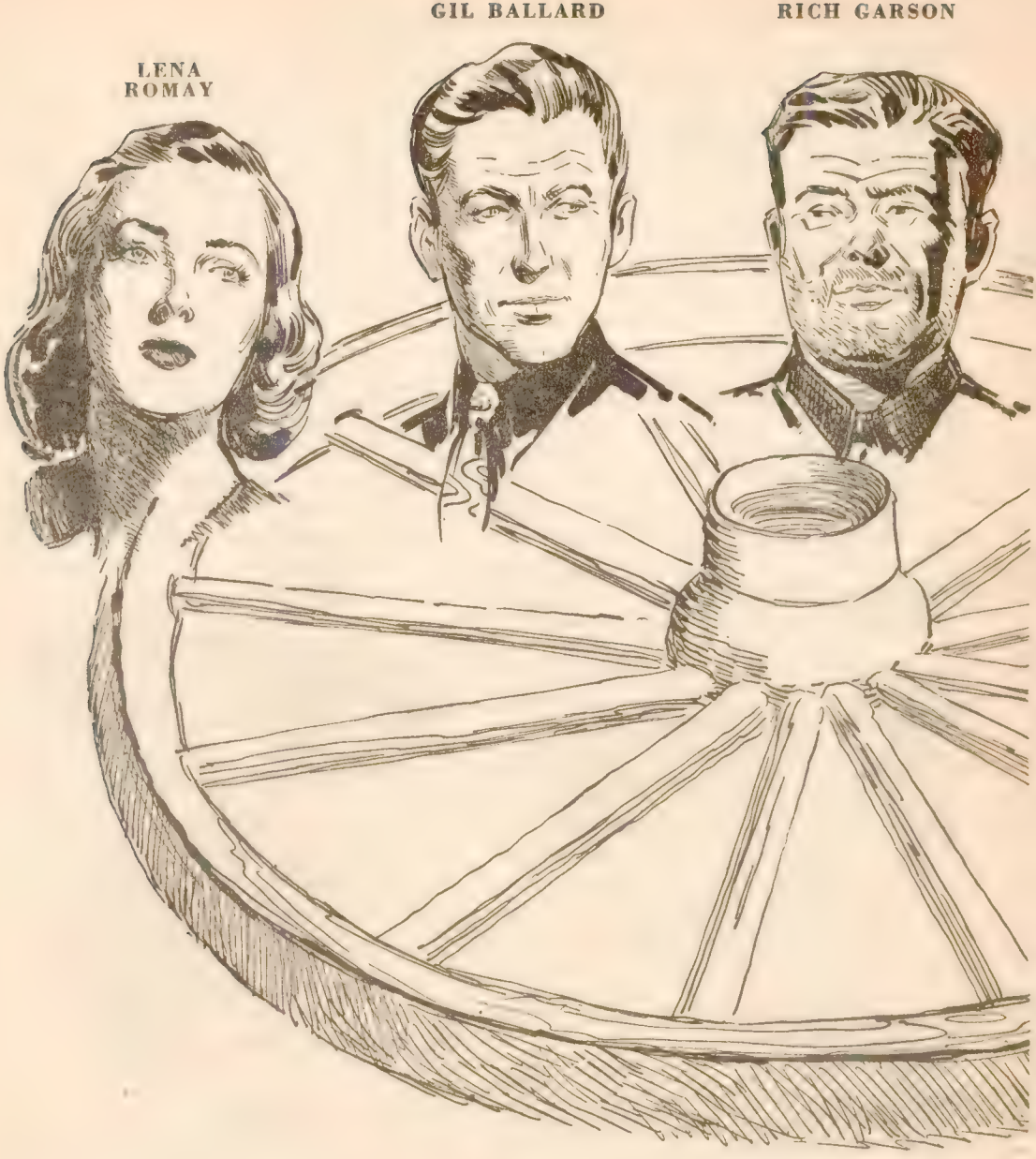
"The saloon keeps him pretty busy."

"I know," she said with a trace of bitterness. "But he doesn't need a saloon. It was a fool thing to do in the first place, going into a business like that when he had a ranch the size of Wagonwheel to look after."

Manahorn reached for his tobacco sack. "He'll grow up one of these days, Ann."

"He's never had to worry about anything, Lee, and now that his father's gone, Gil's turning to you. Turn him down. It's for his own good and you know it."

Manahorn was quiet, wondering how he



could refuse to help the man who had saved his life.

Ann glanced at the wall clock. "I'd better get back to the ranch."

Manahorn got up, his meal only half eaten, and left the café with her. The Wagonwheel buckboard was parked in front of the general store a short distance up the street. He helped her into the rig. With the reins in her hands, Ann sat for a moment, looking soberly at him.

"Don't let him talk you into it, Lee."

Manahorn glanced toward the saloon. "I won't make any promises, Ann."

She seemed about to say something else, and then, deciding against it, lifted the reins, and spoke to the team.

Manahorn stood there and watched her drive out of town. He started back to his shop

before changing his mind and cutting across the street toward the Lucky Lady. I might as well see him and have it over with, he thought.

Before he reached the saloon, the slatted doors parted and Rich Garson came onto the porch, Cody Romay beside him. At sight of Manahorn, Rich drew up and stood there with a smirk on his broad face.

As he approached them, Manahorn felt his muscles tighten, and he remembered his quarrels with Rich and the antagonism that had been between them.

Without even a nod, Manahorn started past.

"Getting kind of uppity since you left the hills, ain't you?"

Manahorn stopped, his level eyes pinned on the heavy-shouldered Rich Garson.

"Get out of my way," Manahorn said softly.

RICH had a habit of cracking his knuckles, and he did that now while he sneered at Manahorn. "I know you from way back, Lee, the son of a third-rate gunman who never got around to marrying your ma."

Manahorn's fist landed in Rich Garson's mouth and drove him back against the front of the saloon. He slammed into the wall and bounced off, his eyes wide with surprise. While he was off balance, Manahorn hit him again and Rich staggered the length of the porch. On the edge he teetered for a moment, waving his arms, and fell into the dirt.

A wicked anger had hold of Manahorn. He

started toward Rich, forgetting Cody Romay. Cody was reaching for his gun. He had it lined on Manahorn's back when a voice cut through the silence.

"Stand hitched, Cody. My six-shooter's pointing right at you."

Manahorn, glancing around, saw that Sheriff Ben Doyle was standing at the far end of the porch. A small, round-bellied man with a limp, Doyle looked unsure of himself as he held his gun on Cody Romay.

Rich Garson was picking himself up now, cursing as he spat dirt from his mouth. "Damn you, Lee. I'll beat your head off."

Anger still burned in Manahorn. "You can try," he said, and started toward the man.

"Forget it, Lee," Sheriff Ben Doyle said in an almost pleading tone. "He ain't worth busting your hands on, and besides, I don't want a brawl here on the street."

Manahorn stopped, his eyes still on Rich Garson who stood there rubbing his jaw and glaring.

The saloon's slatted doors opened and Nate Garson came out. The hill man glanced at his son, at Manahorn, and at the sheriff.

"What's going on here?" Nate asked.

Rich didn't answer. He was still glaring at Manahorn.

Nate smiled crookedly. "Seems like old times, Lee, you and Rich squabbling and scrapping."

Sheriff Ben Doyle came across the porch, looking worried. He said, "I'm not going to have you and your boy coming into town and stirring up trouble, Nate."

Garson gave the lawman a contemptuous stare. "You never was nothing but a chore boy for old man Ballard, Ben, but now he's not around to back your play."

Doyle's face turned red. "I'm still the sheriff here, Nate," he said lamely, "and I'm warning you I won't stand for no foolishness."

The anger was draining out of Manahorn now, but he kept watching Rich Garson, knowing that Rich was not a man to turn your back on.

"Reckon Rich was just having a little fun," Nate Garson said with a glance at his son. "He didn't mean no harm. Come on, Rich, and let's head for home."

Nate walked off the porch and over to the hitch-rack. But Rich lingered a moment, eyeing Manahorn with malice.

"It ain't finished," Rich said through tight lips. "I can promise you that."

"I'll keep it in mind," Manahorn said.

Rich Garson went toward his horse, brushing himself off on the way.

Manahorn looked at young Cody Romay, standing there with resentment etched on his thin face.

"You'd better slow down wtih that six-shooter. kid," Manahorn told him. "It might get you killed one of these days."

"I ain't worried about it," Cody said.

Nate Garson had mounted and now Rich stepped into his saddle, saying, "Come on, Cody. Let's get out of this two-bit burg."

Manahorn watched the three of them ride down the street.

Ben Doyle, his eyes troubled, stared after them. The lawman said heavily, "I should have told them to stay out of this town. That's what I should have done."

"But you didn't, Ben," Manahorn said.

Doyle sighed. "Nate told the truth, Lee, and you know it. I've got a job that's too big for me."

"You've been in office a long time, Ben."

Doyle nodded. "I shouldn't have taken the job in the first place," he said as though he were talking to himself. "I wasn't cut out to be a badge-toter, but it paid better than anything else I could land. And like Garson said, Ballard was always around to back me up."

Manahorn's eyes were still on the three riders. Watching the dust settle slowly behind them, he said, "That Cody Romay is a tough kid, and he's riding for a fall."

"Just acting tough, I figure," the sheriff said. "He's trying to prove to Rich and Nate that he's dry behind the ears."

Manahorn frowned, wondering what kind of woman Lena Romay was, working in a saloon and letting her kid brother run wild.

"See you, Ben," Manahorn said, and turned into the saloon. He was crossing the barroom, remembering his talk wtih Ann, when the door of Gil Ballard's office opened and a girl came out. It was Lena Romay, tall and willowy, her ash-blond hair piled high atop her head.

SHE WAS a shapely and beautiful girl, but every time Manahorn saw her he was reminded of a little dancehall floozie who had lifted a month's wages from him one night while he was on a spree.

When she started past him, Manahorn said, "I'd like a word with you."

She drew up and let him see a dim smile. "I've been here two months, and this is the first time I've gotten more than a nod out of you."

"Does it bother you that there's one man in this town that doesn't fall all over himself trying to get close to you?"

Her smile vanished and resentment flared in her eyes. Then it was gone and she said, "You don't care what you say, do you?"

"Depends on who I'm saying it to."

She put her hands on her hips and stared at him. "Do you usually start a conversation by insulting people?"

"Sorry," he said, smiling. "I suppose the proper approach would be to offer you a drink."

Anger colored her smooth cheeks. "I'm not a percentage girl."

Manahorn's gaze passed over her, taking in the tight-fitting green dress, lingering for a moment on the roundness of her breasts.

Ira Jacks, one of Nate Garson's neighbors who spent most of his time gambling, seemed to appear out of nowhere. A tall man dressed in black, his bony face was emotionless as he looked at Manahorn.

"Everything all right, Lena?" he asked.

Manahorn said mockingly, "You her bodyguard, Jacks?"

The room got quieter.

Lena Romay said quickly, "I don't need any help, Ira."

Jacks gave Manahorn a sharp, steady stare before drifting away.

"Nice friends you have," Manahorn said, watching Jacks move up to the bar. "You and your brother both."

"What about my brother?" she demanded.

He looked at her, seeing the bare shoulders and catching the heady scent of her perfume. He said, "That's what I wanted to tell you. In case you don't know, your brother is palling around with Rich Garson."

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"The Garsons have a bad reputation. I just had a run-in with Rich, and your brother tried to back the play by pulling a gun on me."

"Perhaps you gave him reason to."

He didn't like her attitude. He said, "I don't know much about your brother, but he doesn't strike me as being a bad kid. I thought maybe you'd want to talk to him, try to straighten him out. But I guess you're too busy here to worry about him."

Anger sparked in her eyes, but before she could reply, Manahorn turned away. As he walked toward Gil Ballard's private office, he remembered Lena Romay coming from there, and he wondered if Lena was the reason Gil preferred the saloon business to ranching.

Bareheaded and in his shirt sleeves, Gil Ballard was sitting behind a flat-topped desk. He was medium-built, blond, and handsome, except for a trace of weakness in his jaw.

When Manahorn entered the office, Ballard was working with a pencil, but he laid it down and smiled, showing white, even teeth.

"I'm glad you dropped in, Lee. I was coming down to see you."

"So I heard," Manahorn said, taking a chair across the desk.

Gil Ballard reached for a box of cigars, held it out to Manahorn.

"Thanks, Gil, but I'll stick to the Bull Durham."

Gil took one of the cigars, bit the end off. When he had it going, he said, "You've been talking to Ann."

Manahorn nodded, aware of the puffiness under Gil's eyes. He'd always had a weakness for whisky, cards and women.

"How much did Ann tell you?" Ballard asked, settling back in his chair.

"Only that you're having a little trouble."

"It's more than a little trouble, Lee. A hell of a lot of cows are missing."

"Wagonwheel has a lot of cows, Gil."

"It won't if the rustling isn't checked. You know how those things go—small scale at first, and before long they're stealing you blind."

"Who do you think's back of it?"

"Hell, I don't know. We never had any trouble with rustlers before."

Manahorn reached for tobacco and papers, watching Gil while his fingers were busy with the smoke.

"As long as your dad was alive," Manahorn said, "rustlers rode wide of Wagonwheel."

Gil smiled weakly. "There's no use kidding myself, Lee. I'm not the man my father was. Oh, I can guess what you're thinking. I ought to be out there, looking after the ranch instead of sitting around here on my rump. But I've got a business here, Lee with too much money sunk into it to pull out without losing my shirt."

Manahorn struck a match on the bottom of his chair and got his cigarette going. You don't want to pull out, Gil, he was thinking. You like it too well here.

"You've got a good business," Manahorn said.

"I can thank Lena Romay for that," Gil said, smiling. "She's quite a girl, Lee."

Manahorn sat there, wondering what Gil could see in Lena when he had a wife like Ann. Still, he had to admit, there was something about Lena.

GIL LEANED forward and put his elbows on the desk. "We don't see enough of each other, Lee. It's not right, both of us living right here in town and not finding time to do much more than say hello."

"Both been pretty busy," Manahorn said, but he was thinking something else. Gil had saved his life, but they had never been very close, because Gil had spent most of his time playing cards or chasing women.

Gil studied the ash on his cigar. "I'll never forget the time I found you after you'd hit your head on that rock. You were so far gone that I didn't think you could hold out till I got you to the doc."

"You don't have to remind me, Gil," Manahorn said. "I know I'm still in your debt."

"Hell, I was just thinking back, Lee. I—"

"Come on, Gil. Lay your cards on the table."

"All right," Gil said, rolling the cigar between his fingers. "I'll stop talking around it, Lee. I want you to go back to Wagonwheel, ramrod the outfit, and put a stop to this cow stealing."

Manahorn was silent for a time, remembering what Ann had said about the ranch being Gil's responsibility.

"I'll make it worth your while, Lee."

"What about my business?"

"Let the sheriff look after it. He's always hanging around there, anyway. Besides, it won't be for long—only until you find out who's back of the trouble."

"There are other men you could hire, Gil."

"Not any that I think could get the job done. You spent some time out there, Lee. You know the outfit and the lay of the land. And you're good with a gun."

Manahorn was quiet again, thinking that if he returned to Wagonwheel he would be near Ann. He wondered if Gil would be so anxious for him to take the job if he knew that Manahorn was in love with his wife. A bitterness stirred in Manahorn against Gil, who was putting him into this awkward situation.

"You're not going to turn me down, are you, Lee?"

"No," Manahorn said. "I can't."

Gil Ballard smiled as he stood up. "Come on and I'll buy you a drink."

They left the office and went to the bar. Ira Jacks, the rancher turned gambler, was sitting alone at a corner table, idly shuffling a deck of cards. He glanced at Manahorn and then turned his attention to the piano.

Following Jack's gaze, Manahorn saw Lena Romay leaning against one end of the piano. She was scanning a sheet of music while the piano player, a thin man wearing red garters on his sleeves, struck a few preliminary chords.

"We're just in time to hear Lena practice one of her numbers," Gil said. "That girl can sure put a song over."

Manahorn drained his glass. "I'd better get started, Gil. See you later."

Lena Romay had begun to sing now. Her voice was better than Manahorn had expected, but he had something to do besides stick around here and listen to her warble. As he walked toward the door, he could feel her eyes following him. She wouldn't like him walking out in the middle of her number. He went on, without even glancing in her direction.

Wagonwheel headquarters lay west of town, the mountains behind it bulking dark and

somber. Manahorn reined in on a rise and sat looking down at the buildings. It was an impressive layout, he thought, built by a man who had started from scratch. John Ballard was as fine a man as he'd ever known, a strong man who had shown weakness only where his son was concerned.

Monahan put his horse down the slope, wishing he had been able to avoid the job ahead of him. But it was too late to back out now. He'd have to make the best of it. While he was here, he'd have to try to stay away from Ann. With Gil gone most of the time, it would be too easy for them to take up where they had left off.

Dave Olmes, a small, wiry oldster was coming out of the corral when Manahorn rode into the yard. Olmes was a fixture on the outfit. In his younger days, he had been a top-hand, but since a bronc had thrown him Olmes had been crippled.

"Howdy, Dave," Manahorn said as he swung down.

THEY shook hands and Olmes, smiling at him, said, "Missed you around here, Lee. Been meaning to drop in and see you, but I haven't been to town in a month of Sundays."

Manahorn glanced toward the house, thinking of Ann, wondering what she would say when she learned he had taken the job in spite of her asking him not to.

"Gil asked me to come out," Manahorn said. "He told me about the trouble, and he wants me to try to stop it."

"We can sure use a good man around here," Olmes said with a glance at the bunkhouse. "Sometimes I figure John Ballard was too big-hearted for his own good. He kept me and a crew of stove-up punchers around because he felt sorry for us."

"I wouldn't say that, Dave."

"Hell, it's the truth, and you know it." Olmes sent a stream of tobacco juice into the dirt. "A whole crew of has-beens dragging around, drawing their pay for doing nothing."

"There was a time when John Ballard worked the tails off all of you."

Olmes rubbed his hands on the legs of his levis. "If there were any good men left on the outfit, you wouldn't have to come out here and look into this cow stealing." He shook his head in disgust. "What they ought to do is take us all out and shoot us."

"You must have got up on the wrong side of the bed," Manahorn said.

He took his warbag to the bunkhouse, shook hands and talked with some of the crew. They were a sorry-looking lot, he thought, but they were here to stay, because John Ballard had wanted it that way. The old man had put it in his will and there was nothing Gil could do about getting rid of them, even if he wanted to.

He was relieved to hear that Ann had gone to visit a neighboring rancher's wife and wasn't expected back until evening.

He got his horse and rode out, heading toward the hills. In the late afternoon, he came to a creek and passed the cabin where he had once lived with his father. His mother had died when he was too young to remember her, and his father, a fast man with a gun, had been killed in a saloon brawl. While Manahorn was just a kid his father had taught him how to handle a gun and made him practice every day.

"Being quick on the shoot," his father had told him, "can make the difference whether you live or die."

But Manahorn hadn't taken after his father. He could remember those early days, hanging around his Uncle Jake who had been a saddle-maker.

"A man ought to have a trade," Uncle Jake had said. "Your pa would have been better off if he had taken something up instead of looking to a shooting iron to get him by."

Manahorn rode on, following the stream until he came to the Garson outfit. The yard was filled with weeds; the corral gate sagged. The house, a two-room shack, was without paint and the roof was badly in need of repair. Manahorn made a wry face as he looked at it. Nate had never been one to work up a sweat, and his son took after him.

He rode toward the house, seeing no sign of anyone about the yard. Remembering his run-in with Rich today, Manahorn's hand didn't stray far from his gun.

Nate Garson appeared in the doorway of the house. He looked as if he had just got up from a nap. His hair was tousled. He

stood there with the sunlight on his tough, bearded face, watching Manahorn.

"You haven't been in these hills in a coon's age, Lee."

Manahorn stopped his horse close to the doorway. He said, "I got to thinking about you coming to town today, Nate, and what you said about a man's luck sometimes changing."

Nate scowled. "You didn't come all the way up here to ask me about that, did you?"

Manahorn leaned forward, one hand on the horn. He said, "What you said didn't mean anything at the time, but when I heard Wagonwheel was having some trouble, I started putting two and two together."

Nate Garson stood there with one shoulder against the door frame. His scowl had deepened. "You're not working for Wagonwheel any more, Lee, so why should you be worrying about Gil Ballard's troubles?"

"Because Gil has hired me to find out what's happening to some of his cows. And the way I figure it, you might have decided that with John Ballard dead and his son in town most of the time, you could start collecting on that debt you claim Wagonwheel owes you."

"You don't see any Wagonwheel stuff on my range."

Manahorn said evenly, "You wouldn't likely be keeping them around, but you could be selling them somewhere."

Garson smiled, but his eyes were cold. "So you came up here to give me a warning?"

Manahorn nodded, his steady gaze pinned on Nate Garson. "I just wanted to let you know that whoever's pulling the deal won't have it so easy from here on out. That bunch of old-timers we've got for a crew can't do much, but I'll be around now and I'm going to spend most of my time on a horse."

NATE was silent a moment. Then he said, "Hell, you're barking up the wrong fence post. Me and Rich tend to our own business. If there's rustling going on, it's likely those toughs over on the mesa are behind it. You talk to some of them."

Manahorn glanced about the yard, wondering where Rich and Cody Romay were. Reading the question in his eyes, Nate said, "Rich went out looking for strays. If you've got us pegged for cow thieves, you're dead wrong."

"Maybe," Manahorn said, lifting his reins. "We'll see."

Nate straightened and shoved his hands in his pants pockets. He gave Manahorn a narrow regard. "You should have stuck to saddle-making, Lee, and not let Gil talk you into something that might get you killed."

"Now that I've got the job, Nate, I don't want to fool around any longer than I have to. If you're telling the truth you haven't a thing to fret about, but if you're mixed up in this deal, we'll lock horns. That's a promise."

He reined his horse around and rode out of the yard, leaving Nate Garson in the doorway staring after him.

It was only a mile up the creek to the Romay place and Manahorn rode in that direction. Cody Romay was supposed to be looking after the outfit, but lately, Cody had been spending most of his time with Rich. Cody was just a wild kid, Manahorn thought, who needed someone to hold him down. But his folks were dead and his sister, instead of staying home and looking after him, had gone to work in a saloon.

Manahorn had covered half the distance to the Romay place when uneasiness touched him. He glanced back, wondering if Nate Garson had decided to trail him. The hillside was in shadows and he saw no sign of anyone. He passed a grove of quaking aspen, apprehension still nagging him.

The shot came from the willow thickets along the creek bank, a flat, harsh sound that shattered the deep silence that held the hills. A small sound had warned Manahorn, causing him to turn toward the stream. Something hot and heavy struck his head above the right ear and he felt the quick flow of blood.

He flung himself out of the saddle as the rifle cut loose again. This time lead whistled past him, missing by inches. Then he was down in the weeds, hugging the ground while he drew his gun. He worked his way behind a boulder and drew up, fighting the pain in his head.

From the creek bank the rifle spoke again

Manahorn stopped him with a hard right to the jaw

and a bullet knocked stone splinters from the boulder. With the sound of the shot still echoing across the hills, Manahorn raised up and sent a quick shot into the willows. He had a glimpse of a rifle barrel jerking back out of sight, but the man behind the weapon was not visible.

Manahorn fired again, his bullet cutting through branches. He emptied his gun and crouched behind the boulder while he quickly shoved in fresh loads. Dizziness swept him and he shook his head savagely to clear it. The pain was getting worse and blood kept pouring from the wound in his head.

The boulder offered meager protection, and he realized that the ambusher could work his way down the creek and come in from behind him. He glanced about, searching for some better place to fort up, but there was none. While he was waiting for the next shot, hoofbeats sounded along the creek trail. Manahorn had a glimpse of a man splashing across the stream and spurring up the far bank. Manahorn fired once and knew he had missed. Then the ambusher was gone, pushing his horse hard.

Manahorn sat with his back against the boulder, too weak to get to his feet. Through his pain-blurred vision, he saw another rider approach from the other side and come to a stop close to him. A small cry told him it was a woman, but he didn't recognize Lena Romay until she was bending over him.

"You're hurt!" she cried. "Can you make it up to the house?"

He nodded and with her help managed to get on his horse. He held to the horn, too far gone to remember the ride, but he knew the

girl was close to him. Once she reached out to keep him from falling.

IT WAS dark by the time they reached the Romay place. Manahorn slid out of the saddle, letting Lena help him inside the log house. He sat at the kitchen table while she lighted a lamp. Then she was working on him, bathing the wound, and using an antiseptic.

The bullet had sliced an inch gash above his ear, but it wasn't serious. By the time Lena had finished bandaging it, Manahorn felt better. He tried to roll a smoke, but his fingers weren't steady and the paper broke.

"Here," Lena said, reaching for the tobacco sack, "you'd better let me do that for you."

He watched her fashion the smoke, dribbling tobacco into the wheatstraw paper and wetting the flap with her tongue. Then she rolled it neatly between her slender fingers and put it between his lips.

"Lot of men can't roll a smoke that good," Manahorn said.

She struck a match and lighted the cigarette for him. "Did you see who it was shooting at you?" she asked.

Manahorn shook his head.

"You don't think it was my brother?"

"No, but I'd lay odds it was the man your brother's palling around with."

Lena's smooth face looked troubled. "Cody's not really bad, but he's always been a little wild and headstrong. I didn't know until today that he was spending so much time with the Garsons."

Manahorn looked at her through the smoke from his cigarette, wondering why a girl would prefer working in a saloon to living on a ranch. Maybe that wildness in Cody ran in the family. Ranch life could be pretty dull if a person craved excitement.

He studied her as she built a fire and put coffee on to boil. She wore a black riding habit, and it occured to him that it was the first time he had seen her on a horse. Of course she hadn't been in Renaldo long, and Manahorn, with Ann Ballard on his mind, had eyes for no other woman.

"Are you feeling better now?" Lena asked.

"Yes, thanks to you."

The kitchen was cluttered and Lena shook her head as she started gathering up the pots and pans and dirty dishes. She said, "I'm afraid my brother isn't a very good housekeeper."

"You'd better have a talk with Cody," Manahorn said, watching her as she moved about the stove. "If he's not already mixed up in a deal with the Garsons, he will be if he keeps hanging around them."

"I'm sure my brother wouldn't do anything crooked."

She sounded sincere, but he reminded himself what she was, a pretty little trollop that would laugh and drink with you and empty your pockets if she got the chance. You couldn't afford to trust her kind. Hell, a woman who would let a bunch of drunks paw her couldn't be much.

"I'd better get going," he told her.

She came to the table and the lamplight touched her blond hair. She said, "Don't you think you ought to rest awhile yet?"

"I'll be all right."

He thanked her again and left the house. When he was on his horse he looked back and saw her standing in the doorway, a slender figure, motionless in the shadows.

Manahorn rode through the darkness, scowling as he passed the spot where someone had lain in wait for him. He doubted that it was Nate Garson, but Rich could have been watching when he left the Garson place. Rich was the kind to shoot a man from the brush. Manahorn thought. His hand went to the bandage and he remembered Lena's cool fingers, working swiftly. If the girl hadn't come along when she did, he might have laid there beside the boulder and bled to death.

It was dark by the time he reached Wagonwheel. He stripped his horse and turned him into the corral before going to the cook shack. There was a dull ache back of his eyes.

Supper was over, but the cook, a lanky oldster, prepared Manahorn a hasty meal.

While he was busy at the stove, the cook said, "Mrs. Ballard said she'd like to see you when you came in."

When Manahorn had finished eating, he left the cook shack and stopped in front of the building to roll a smoke. There was lamp-

light in the big house and he thought of Ann, spending most of her time alone since Gil had gone into the saloon business.

He took his time with the smoke, his eyes remaining on the house. He'd never gone with a girl until he met Ann. He had loved her from the very first, and he knew she had loved him. She had said so—before Gil Ballard started making a play for her.

Manahorn swore under his breath as he realized that he was stalling, putting off seeing her. He might as well get it over with, he thought, and walked across the yard.

He reached the front porch before he saw her sitting there in the shadows.

"Hello, Lee."

"Howdy, Ann."

He removed his Stetson, and she could see the bandage about his head.

"Lee, what happened?"

"It's nothing much," he said and explained briefly what had happened.

SHE GOT out of her chair, and her searching gaze made him uncomfortable. She said, "I thought I could talk you into turning Gil down, but I guess I knew all the time that you wouldn't."

"I'm sorry, Ann, but a man has to play his cards the way he sees them."

"I suppose he does. But Gil shouldn't be asking someone else to pull his chestnuts out of the fire."

Manahorn leaned against the porch railing, twisting the brim of his hat. "All I know is he asked me to give him a hand, and I couldn't turn him down."

"Don't you know that if you solve this problem for him, he'll come to you again? Every time there is something unpleasant for him to face, he'll come to you."

"But the next time I'll turn him down because my debt will have been paid."

"You may be dead by then." Bitterness edged her voice. "You're acting like a fool, Lee. You don't owe him your life."

Manahorn couldn't see her face clearly in the darkness, but he stood there, looking soberly at her. He said, "That's your husband you're talking about, Ann."

"My husband," she said, the bitterness still in her voice. "I married a boy, a charming, irresponsible boy. I thought he would grow up to be what his father was, but I know now he'll never change."

"Give him time, Ann."

She stood quietly for a time, looking out across the yard. Night breeze stirred her hair and Manahorn could see the rise and fall of her bosom. She had been his girl once, but he had lost her. Gil had tired of her quickly, he thought, as soon as the newness wore off. That was the way it was with a man who got everything he wanted.

Ann turned to face him. "I'm sorry I got so upset. It won't happen again."

Manahorn glanced toward the bunkhouse. "I'd better turn in, Ann."

She reached out and laid her hand on his arm. "Stay and talk to me a while, Lee."

His mouth felt dry and his heart was beating faster. Suddenly he reached for her and she came into his arms. He held her and kissed her long and hard. She made no attempt to pull away. Darkness covered them and for a brief moment, Manahorn escaped from reality.

Then Ann was pulling away and he let her go. He tried to read her expression, but her face was only a pale blur in the darkness.

"I'm sorry, Ann," he said in a voice that wasn't steady. "I shouldn't have done that."

"It was my fault as much as yours," she said. "I suppose I've been feeling a little sorry for myself."

"You know how I felt about you. Why did you marry Gil?"

She turned away from him and stood staring into the darkness. "John Ballard took me in and gave me a home when I had no place to go. He was the finest man I ever knew, Lee. He treated me like a daughter, and he thought I was the one who might get Gil to settle down. After what he'd done for me, I couldn't refuse him."

"You married a man you didn't love, Ann."

"No, I didn't love him at first. I guess I was too crazy about you. But Gil was good to me for awhile and I was happy and I began to care for him. If he hadn't gotten that crazy notion about buying a saloon everything would have been all right."

They were quiet for a while and then Manahorn said, "I've got to get some sleep, Ann.

I want to be up early in the morning."

"Good night, Lee."

He went toward the bunkhouse, thinking of how long he had gone on loving her. He had stayed away from other women, wanting no part of them. He had his memory of her, but tonight, as he held her in his arms again, the girl did not quite match the memory. Something was missing; he wasn't sure what.

The next morning Manahorn was up early. He ate a good breakfast, went to the corral and put his saddle on a black gelding. The horse was full of steam, but Manahorn stayed with him until he cooled down. He rode past the house, wondering if Gil had come home last night. Most likely he hadn't because the saloon didn't close until late.

AN HOUR later he came to Wagonwheel's west fence and rode along it for a mile or more. Then he stopped and sat looking at the gap where the wire had been cut. He could see the tracks cattle had made going through the opening. And they hadn't broken through, he could tell. Somebody had cut the wire.

He rode on, following the tracks into the hills. There were about twenty head, he judged, and remembered what Gil Ballard had said, "Small scale at first, and before long they're stealing you blind."

The tracks led him to a creek where he lost them. Manahorn knew what had happened. The rustlers had put the cattle into the water and headed them upstream or downstream.

He spent an hour riding in both directions before he picked up the trail where the cattle had come out of the water. The tracks led west toward the mountains. Since there were no ranchers in this direction, Manahorn became puzzled. Then it occurred to him that there was a mining camp in the mountains.

It was mid-morning when Manahorn reached Silverton. The mining camp was small. Unpainted log buildings lined a short, hard-packed street. Manahorn rode slowly, watching the roughly dressed men coming and going from one of the buildings, which had a crudely lettered sign on it that said saloon. A bay tied to the rack in front of the building looked like the horse Cody Romay had been riding yesterday, but Manahorn wasn't sure.

He rode on down the street, telling himself that miners ate a lot of beef. There would be a meat market, somewhere. He found it across from the hotel. As he dismounted in front of the place, he glanced back along the street in time to see two men come out of the saloon. Rich Garson and Cody Romay. He watched them go to their horses and ride out of town in the direction he had come from.

Manahorn frowned, no doubt in his mind that Rich and Cody had brought the cattle here, sold them and were on their way home. He stood for a moment, undecided as he stared after the two men.

A sound from the meat market drew Manahorn's attention. He went under the rack and was approaching the doorway when a beefy man in a dirty white apron appeared in the opening.

"You the owner of this place?" Manahorn asked.

"That's right. Name's Sam Acklebee. What can I do for you?"

"I'm from the Wagonwheel outfit. Last night somebody hit the herd. I trailed them to this camp."

Acklebee was suddenly uneasy. "I don't know anything about it."

"Who do you buy your beef from?"

"Why from several ranchers." Acklebee wet his lips nervously. "Mostly from a fellow over near Dryden."

"You never do any business with the Garsons?"

Acklebee shook his head. "I don't know anybody by that name."

The man was lying, Manahorn thought. The cattle were hidden, around somewhere, waiting to be butchered.

"I'll likely see you again," Manahorn said.

Sam Acklebee went back inside, but as Manahorn rode away from the meat market, he saw the man watching him from the window.

Instead of returning to Wagonwheel, Manahorn rode toward the town of Renaldo. He swung south, and as he passed the Romay outfit, he pulled in, seeing Cody come from the corral. At sight of Manahorn, young Romay drew up and stood there, waiting for Manahorn to reach him.

Manahorn nodded, noticing that Rich Gar-

son's horse was in front of the house.

"What do you want?" Cody asked sullenly.

"Just going by," Manahorn said. "I've been over to Silvetrton. I got there just as you and Rich were pulling out."

"So what?"

"Somebody stole some Wagonwheel beef last night," Manahorn said, reaching for his tobacco sack. "The cattle were driven to Silverton."

"You accusing me of stealing them?" Cody demanded.

Manahorn thumbed a match alight. "The cows are gone, and at the end of the trail I find you and Rich Garson."

Cody Romay stood there, a belligerent thrust to his jaw. "I've got a girl at Silverton, Manahorn, and it's none of your damned business if I want to go there to see her."

Rich Garson came out of the house, his mouth full and a thick slice of bread in one hand. He saw Manahorn then and hauled up, suddenly cautious.

"What's he doing here?" Rich asked.

"Thinks we might know something about some missing cows," Cody said, without taking his eyes off Manahorn.

"Sometimes they hang men for cattle rustling," Manahorn said steadily, directing his words at Cody Romay. "I thought maybe you didn't know what you were getting into, but it looks like I was wrong."

"You've got nothing on me," Cody said sulkily.

Rich Garson came toward them, walking slowly. He said, "He just likes to talk, Cody. He ain't got nothing on nobody."

Manahorn was still on his horse. He looked at the big, ugly Rich Garson, and said, "You didn't shoot straight enough at my back yesterday."

Rich sneered, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm facing you now, Rich," Manahorn said tonelessly. "You want to try it again?"

If there was fear in Rich Garson it didn't show. He said, "You don't scare me, Lee, but I'm not going to let you sucker me into a showdown. Not until I'm damned good and ready."

Manahorn's face was hard. "If I knew for sure it was you who tried to get me yesterday, Rich, I'd put a bullet in your guts right now."

"You started something with your fists yesterday," Rich said. "Right now, I'd like to finish it."

MANAHORN was in no mood for a fist fight. But he glanced at Cody Romay, thinking that if he could show the kid that Rich wasn't the man he made out he was, it might cause Cody to do some serious thinking.

Manahorn flipped his cigarette into the dust and started to swing down. He still had one foot in the stirrup when Rich rushed forward and hit him a vicious blow on the back of the neck. Manahorn, his foot free of the stirrup, staggered and went to his knees. Rich, in close now, lifted a knee under Manahorn's chin and knocked him over backwards. Dazed from the blow, Manahorn saw Rich lunging toward him. He tried to roll away, but Rich landed on him and pinned him to the ground.

Still trying to fight off the grogginess, Manahorn looked up into Rich Garson's savage face. The man's teeth were set, his lips twisted. He tried to grind a thumb into Manahorn's eye, but Manahorn got hold of his wrist and forced the hand away from his face.

Writhing, twisting, Manahorn managed to throw the big man off. Rich tried to pull him down again, but Manahorn got away. He was recovering from the effects of the first blow now, and when Rich came driving in, Manahorn stopped him with a hard right to the jaw.

Cody Romay had backed away from them and stood there, looking on in silence.

A pile-driver blow under the heart brought a grunt out of Rich Garson. He backed away, cursing.

"Come on, Rich," Manahorn said tauntingly. "Back up that big talk you've been maknig to the kid. Show him how tough you are."

Rich cursed again. He put his head down and drove forward in an attempt to put Manahorn on the ground again. It was the way Rich preferred to fight. But Manahorn knew if he was going to win this fight, he'd have to stay on his feet. He side-stepped, and as Rich lunged past him, Manahorn slugged him on the side of the head.

Knocked off balance, Rich Garson sprawled in the dirt. He pulled himself up to his hands and knees and shook his head like some huge dog.

"What are you waiting for?" Manahorn said, taunting him again. "Get on your feet."

With a grunt of rage, Rich came off the ground. Manahorn, both fists cocked, was waiting for him. Manahorn went under a wild swing, came up and hit Rich twice in the face, both blows cracking loud in the silence.

Rich Garson staggered back and Manahorn followed him, staying in close, giving the man no time to recover from the furious attack. Both of them were breathing hard, their clothing covered with dust. Rich's nose was bleeding, and there was a smear of blood on Manahorn's jaw where Rich's knee had ripped the skin.

Rich Garson retreated across the yard, fighting desperately now. He came up against the well, grunting, panting. Manahorn aimed for the jaw again, but Rich got away from the blow by bending backwards over the well. He tried to drive a boot into Manahorn's stomach, but Manahorn twisted away. Before Rich could break into the clear, Manahorn moved in again, leaning over the man and raining blows down into his face.

After a moment, Rich Garson stopped struggling, and his eyes turned glassy. Manahorn pulled him away from the well and let him fall to the ground. Rich lay there in the dirt, unmoving.

When he was sure that Rich was finished, Manahorn straightened and walked slowly back to his horse. Cody Romay stood there watching him, saying nothing.

Manahorn stepped into the saddle. With the reins in his hand, he sat for a moment, letting Cody see the grim set of his face.

"Not a bad little outfit you've got here, kid," Manahorn said. "Start looking after it and forget about making money the easy way."

Rich Garson was struggling to rise when Manahorn rode out of the yard.

It was mid-afternoon when Manahorn reached Renaldo. He came to his saddle shop and pulled up when he saw Sheriff Ben Doyle standing on the walk.

"Howdy, Ben," Manahorn said, stepping down. "What are you looking for?"

DOYLE turned away from the window. "Just killing time, Lee. Guess I'm already getting kind of lonesome for the smell of your leather."

"You think so much of the place," Manahorn said, smiling, "maybe I ought to sell out to you."

"If I thought you were serious, I'd make you an offer."

Manahorn glanced at the padlock he had put on the door, remembering how he used to hang around the place as a kid. He'd learned the trade from his Uncle Jake, but he'd never really been satisfied living in town. Ranching was what he liked. But when his uncle died and left him the business, Manahorn had run it because it gave him an excuse to stay in Renaldo, where he could be near Ann and look at her once in a while. He swore softly. Now that she was married to Gil, why couldn't he make the best of it?

There was a distant expression in the sheriff's eyes. He said, "Funny how a man can get off on the wrong foot sometimes. Here I am toting a badge, trying to handle a job I wasn't cut out for. And that's the way it is with you, too."

"How do you figure?"

"Well, you're a saddle-maker, a damned good one, but you're not happy with it. I can tell by the way you act. Why the hell didn't you sell the business in the first place and buy you a little spread. That's what you want and you know it."

"There were no ranches around here for sale, only the Romay place and I couldn't get enough to swing the deal. While I was trying to raise the cash, that girl and her brother came along and bought it."

Manahorn glanced along the street. His eyes passed over the doctor's office, then went back. Ann Ballard was coming out the door. Manahorn frowned as he watched her go to a buggy. A moment later she was driving down the street, slowing the rig when she came to the Lucky Lady. She looked at the saloon, and then her troubled glance found Manahorn. She drove on and pulled over to the walk when she reached the saddle shop.

The sheriff tipped his hat. "Howdy, ma'am."

"Hello, Ben."

Doyle excused himself, saying he had busi-

ness at his office. When he had turned up the street, Manahorn looked closely at Ann Ballard.

"I saw you coming out of the doc's office," Manahorn said. "You all right?"

She looked disturbed for a second, and then a dim smile caught at her mouth. "The cook's rheumatism has been bothering him. He asked me to get something from the doctor for him."

Manahorn told her about trailing the stolen cattle to Silverton, but Ann had something else on her mind. She kept glancing toward the saloon. As soon as Manahorn finished relating what had happened that morning, Ann said, "I hate to go in that place, Lee, but I'd like to see Gil about something."

"I'll go over and tell him," Manahorn said.

Ann glanced along the street. "I have some shopping to do. I'll be at the store."

Manahorn nodded and cut across the street. He was frowning, faintly puzzled by Ann's behavior. There were only a few customers in the Lucky Lady, Manahorn saw when he stepped inside. Ira Jacks, the gambler, was sitting at a corner table, fingering a stack of chips. There was a look of annoyance on Jacks's gaunt face as he eyed the door to Gil Ballard's office.

Manahorn walked to the bar where a man in a white apron was polishing glasses.

"Gil around?"

The bartender nodded toward the office door.

Manahorn walked on. The office door was standing ajar, so he didn't bother to knock. He pushed the door open and then drew up, stopped by what he saw. Gil Ballard and Lena Romay were standing in front of the desk, close together. Gil had his arm around the girl.

"Guess I should have knocked," Manahorn said.

The girl stepped back, her cheeks coloring.

Gil flushed and tried to smile. He said weakly, "Hello, Lee."

Manahorn said, "Ann's over at the general store. She wants to see you."

Gil picked up some stacks of money from the desk and came to the door. He said, "I've got to get back to my game. I'll see her later."

Anger cut through Manahorn. When Gil started past him, he lifted his hand to stop him. Then he thought better of it. This was no time to tell Gil what he thought of him.

He watched Gil cross the barroom toward the corner table where Ira Jacks sat waiting.

LENA was still in the office, standing beside the desk. Now she came to the doorway, and when Manahorn started to turn away, she said, "Wait."

He faced her, letting her see the accusation in his eyes.

"I know how it looks, Manahorn," she said quietly. "You think I've been making a play for the boss, but you're wrong. I came here to talk to him about one of my numbers, and he began getting ideas."

"Sure, and you didn't encourage him a bit."

Resentment narrowed her eyes. "I didn't want to make a scene, so I let him kiss me. It's the first time it's happened, no matter what you may think."

Mahathorn glanced at the table where Jacks and Gil sat facing each other. Then, returning his critical gaze to the girl, he said, "It's no business of mine what you and Gil Ballard do, so why bother to explain?"

"Because I don't want anyone getting the wrong idea."

She sounded sincere, but he was in no mood to stand here listening to her talk. He said shortly, "Let's forget it."

He left her standing there and walked to the bar.

"Whisky," Manahorn said, wondering if it would wash the bad taste out of his mouth.

Lena was still standing where he had left her. He could feel her eyes on him and after a moment she came to the bar.

"You think I'm just a cheap little tramp, don't you, Manahorn? Someone who's out to get what she can."

With a whisky glass in his hand, Manahorn scowled at her. "I told you to forget it."

She shook her head. "No. I have something else I want to say."

"Then say it and get it over with."

She stared at him angrily. "People who live in tarpaper houses shouldn't throw rocks."

"Talk sense."

"All right, I will." She spoke in a low, ac-

cusing tone. "Everyone in this town knows how you feel about Gil Ballard's wife. And I've noticed the way you look at her."

"Shut up," Manahorn said softly.

Lena smiled coldly. "And you have the nerve to treat me like I was dirt, like you were too good for me. Why—"

"Shut up," Manahorn said roughly.

Lena hesitated for an instant, then turned and walked away swiftly across the room through a curtained doorway.

Manahorn stood scowling after her, troubled by what she had said, and by his own reply. Then he drained his glass and turned away from the bar. Gil Ballard was concentrating on his cards. He didn't look up, but Ira Jacks's cold eyes touched Manahorn, lingering for a moment.

Manahorn stopped at the general store only long enough to tell Ann that Gil was tied up and would see her later. Then he went to the café, remembering that he hadn't eaten since breakfast. As he entered the café, Ann was driving away toward home.

Sheriff Ben Doyle was sitting on one of the stools, drinking a cup of coffee.

Manahorn, taking a stool next to him, said, "Ben, do you feel up to making a ride tonight?"

"Wish I could, Lee, but every time I get on a horse any more, I'm laid up for a week."

Manahorn was thoughful for a time. Then he said, "Can you make me a deputy?"

"Reckon I could."

When Manahorn rode out of town an hour later there was a badge in his shirt pocket. He headed for Wagonwheel and on the way he kept remembering what Lena Romay had said to him. It was none of her business, he thought, but she was right.

He rode on, hitting an easy pace. Did he really love Ann, he wondered, recalling their meeting last night. Her lips had been warm and sweet, but they had failed to stir him as they once had. For the first time it came to him that he might be in love with a memory.

At the ranch Manahorn found Dave Olmes squatting on his boot heels outside the bunkhouse.

"You've been gone all day," the oldster said. "I was beginning to wonder if something had happened to you."

Manahorn told him about finding the break in the fence and trailing the cattle to Silverton.

"You think it's the Garsons?" Olmes asked.

"I'd be willing to bet on it," Manahorn said. "But I've got to have some proof."

Olmes stood up and put his back against the bunkhouse wall. He said, "I'll lay you odds that if you put a little pressure on that fellow at the meat market, he'll tell you who's selling beef to him."

Manahorn put a cigarette together, glancing toward the house while his fingers were busy with the tobacco. He thought of Ann leaving town without seeing Gil. Manahorn swore under his breath. Gil had been too busy playing cards to see his wife.

BRINGING his thoughts back to the present, Manahorn said, "Wagonwheel covers a lot of miles, Dave. It's hard to figure where those cow thieves are going to hit the herd next."

"I know, and you can't be everywhere at once." Olmes's face held a sour expression. "You've got to have some help, Lee, but you sure as hell won't get it around here."

"You boys may not be able to do much fighting," Manahorn said. "But some of you can still ride, can't you?"

Olmes nodded slowly.

"Then have every man saddle up, Dave, and station them along the west fence. If they see anything, they don't need to kick up a ruckus. Just tell them to get word to me. I'll be at Soda Springs."

"All right, Lee. We haven't got enough riders to cover all the west fence, but I'll string them out, and we might get lucky." He was quiet for a moment, studying Manahorn. "You're taking a hell of a lot on your shoulders, Lee, trying to pull Gil out of this mess."

Manahorn was silent, looking again at the house.

"Maybe Gil appreciates what you're doing," Olmes went on. "But I kind of doubt it. Hell, I know it's none of my business, but if it was me, I'd tell him to get out here and take care of his own mess."

"You'd better get the boys started," Mana-

horn said. "Likely there won't be any trouble until later, but you never can tell."

He went to the corral and cut out a fresh horse. As he was saddling, he thought about what Olmes had said. How much did you owe a man who had saved your life? And was it gratitude that had caused him to take the job, or was it that he had seen a chance to be near Ann?

He was riding out when Ann Ballard called to him from the front porch of the big house.

"Lee."

He reined his mount around and rode to the edge of the yard. There he dismounted and leaving the horse ground-tied, walked to the porch. Ann met him at the steps and he looked at her, wondering what she had on her mind.

"I won't keep you but a minute. Lee."

He stared at her searchingly.

She said, "I've been thinking about what happened between us last night, Lee. After the way I behaved, I was afraid that you might think that I—"

When she hesitated, Manahorn said, "That you were still in love with me?"

She nodded, unable to meet his eyes.

"You don't want me to get my hopes up, is that it?" he asked.

She looked at him now and her face was serious. "You were my first beau, Lee, and I was crazy about you. Then I started going with Gil. I didn't feel anything for him at first, but it wasn't long until I was in love with him. That love has grown deeper and stronger."

Manahorn stood there with his hat in his hands. He said, "I understand, Ann. Last night you were lonesome, and you remembered what had been between us once." He smiled dimly. "I've been a damned fool, eating my heart out over a lovely, laughing little girl. But last night I found out something. You're a woman and I'm a man and what we had once is gone."

She smiled at him. "Oh, Lee, I'm glad you understand!" Then a shadow clouded her eyes and she sighed. "If only Gil would give up that saloon and come home, everything would be all right."

"I've got to go, Ann." Manahorn glanced into the gathering darkness. He started toward his horse and then swung back, saying, "It'll work out."

But he was saying something he wasn't sure about. As he stepped into the saddle, he was remembering going to Gil's office and finding him with Lena Romay. Of course Gil wasn't likely to be serious about the saloon girl, but the fool ought to be home with his wife.

Manahorn was at the edge of the yard when he heard the hard drum of hoofs. A moment later a rider swept into the yard, coming from the direction of town.

Manahorn reined his horse into the path of the oncoming rider and stared hard, trying to make out who it was. Then he recognized Lena Romay. The girl's hair was loose and streaming out behind her. She pulled in abruptly.

"I was hoping to find you here, Manahorn," she said, her voice low and urgent. "Gil needs you."

"What's up?"

"He's still playing poker with Ira Jacks and he's been losing heavily. I'm sure Jacks is cheating, and I just know there'll be trouble before the game is over."

"Gil can handle Jacks."

"But the Garsons are there, along with a friend of theirs."

Manahorn sat his saddle for a moment in indecision. Then he said, "You have one of the boys saddle you a fresh horse. I'll go on to town."

He left her and rode toward Renaldo.

IT WAS dark when he reached the town. The street looked deserted and only a few of the buildings were lighted. He was heading toward the Lucky Lady when he heard the shot, a loud, harsh sound in the stillness.

Manahorn pulled in at the rack, a sense of alarm gripping him. Echoes of the shot were still bouncing back and forth between the buildings. From inside the saloon came the scrape of a chair, followed by a man's rough voice, bawling something that Manahorn couldn't catch. He crossed the porch, and his hand was close to his gun as he entered the saloon.

Just inside the slatted doors, Manahorn

drew up, his gaze fastening on the corner of the room where last he had seen Gil Ballard and Ira Jacks in a poker game. Now Jacks was slumped over the table, his face in a pile of scattered cl.ps. Blood was dripping onto the floor, forming a pool near one of the table legs.

Gil Ballard was backed against the wall. The gun in his hand moved back and forth, covering the five men who stood in a half circle. There was Nate and Rich Garson and a cousin of Rich's named Ed Wills. The other two were saloon bums, a couple of toughs who would do anything for a drink.

Gil's face was lined with strain. He said hoarsely, "Keep away from me. Keep away."

"You killed him, Ballard," Nate Garson said. "You shot him down without a chance."

"What the hell are you trying to pull?" There was a wildness in Gil's eyes. "It was self-defense, and you know it."

Nate shook his head. "Ira wasn't packing his gun."

"You're lying," Gil said. "He had a gun, and he made a grab for it when I caught him dealing that last one off the bottom of the deck."

"He hasn't got a gun now," Rich said. "What happened to it?"

Gil's face was wet and shining in the lamplight. "Nate went over to see if he was dead," he said, "and while he was close to Jacks, Nate lifted the gun. That's the only way it could have happened."

None of the men gave any indication they had seen Manahorn come in. He stood motionless, listening, looking on.

Without taking his hard eyes off Gil, Nate spoke to his companions. "Let's get him. He's not going to shoot us."

Gil's hand was shaking. Watching him, Manahorn could guess how it was. Gil had killed one man tonight, and he didn't want to kill another.

Nate started forward, a grim set to his face, and the other four followed him. Slowly, menacingly, they advanced toward Gil Ballard.

Gil's back was against the wall, his knees bent slightly. "I told you to keep away from me."

Manahorn drew his pistol, and his voice cut into the silence like a sharp knife. "Move back, boys, unless one of you want a bullet in your belly."

The five men halted and turned to face him.

"You'd better keep out of this, Manahorn," Nate said, scowling. "This jigger shot a man down in cold blood."

Manahorn's gun was ready. He said, "You boys lay your guns on the table, and be careful how you go about it."

The two saloon bums weren't armed. They stood there, shifting uneasily.

Nate was the last to put his gun on the table.

He seemed reluctant to part with it. But after a glance at Manahorn, he laid the gun down and moved back.

Gil, looking visibly relieved, backed along the wall until he was beside Manahorn.

Rich said sullenly, "You ain't the law, mister."

Manahorn pulled the deputy's badge from his shirt pocket and held it up so they could see it.

"You're wrong, Rich. Ben Doyle has appointed me his deputy."

He spoke to Gil without looking at him. "Anybody except these five see what happened?"

"No, business was slow, so I let the bartender go home early."

Boots clumped across the porch, and Sheriff Ben Doyle came hurrying into the barroom. The lawman was bareheaded and his hair was mussed. He looked as if he'd gotten out of bed in a hurry. He drew up, panting as he made a quick survey of the room.

"What's going on here?"

Manahorn told him. There was suspicion in the sheriff's eyes as he turned to Gil.

"It was him or me, Ben," Gil said shakily. "I caught him cheating and when I accused him of it, he reached for his gun."

"He's lying like hell," Nate said. "Ira was winning, giving him a cleaning, and Ballard couldn't stand it. I was watching the game and I saw what happened."

Doyle turned his attention to the two saloon bums. "You fellows see what happened?"

BOTH men were nervous and ill at ease. One of them said, "We were watching the game, but we'd gone to get a drink when the shooting started."

Manahorn gave them a critical stare. "You took Nate's word for what happened and backed him up because you thought there might be a drink in it for you."

The men shuffled their feet and said nothing.

"Doesn't make any difference whether they saw it or not," Nate said. "There's three of us that did."

The Garsons and Ed Wills would stick together, Manahorn thought, because they were friends of Jacks. Likely Jacks had told them how he planned to take Gil in a poker game and they had come in to watch the fun. After the shooting, Nate had seen a good chance to get even.

Manahorn spoke to the sheriff. "Ben, take a look and see if Ira had a shoulder holster."

Doyle nodded and crossed to the table. He straightened Ira's body in the chair and pulled his coat back. "He's wearing a shoulder rig, all right, but that white-handled gun he carried isn't in it."

Manahorn's gun still covered the Garsons and Ed Wills. Without taking his eyes off them, Manahorn said, "If a man decided to leave his iron at home, he'd most likely shed the holster, too."

Nate didn't look so sure of himself now.

"Open that jumper, Nate," Manahorn said. "Let's see what's inside it."

Nate took a step back.

"I wouldn't try reaching for it," Manahorn warned him. "Just stand still and let Ben come over and get it."

The white-handled gun was shoved in Nate's waistband. He stood there stiffly, glaring at Manahorn while the sheriff came forward and lifted the weapon.

"It's Ira's gun, all right," Doyle said, moving back. "I used to tell him white-handled guns were bad luck, but he wouldn't believe it."

If Nate had used his head, Manahorn thought, he could have claimed that Jacks had given him the gun to hold for him before the game started. But that evidently hadn't occurred to the hill man.

Ben Doyle put an accusing stare on the two saloon bums. "I ought to run you two in for your part in this, but both of you would be glad to get free board, so I won't do it."

"You mean we can go?" one of them asked.

The sheriff nodded. "Take the body over to the undertaker. There'll be an inquest in the morning, and you boys better be around then."

Rich Garson wet his lips. "What about us?"

"I'm locking Nate up, but I haven't enough to hold you and Wills on. You boys better head for home, and be damned glad you're getting off so lucky."

Nate was sullen. He glanced at his son and Wills, but they moved past him without a word and left the saloon.

When the body had been removed and Doyle had left the saloon with his prisoner, Gil and Manahorn went to the bar for a drink.

With a sigh of relief, Gil said, "I was sure glad you showed up when you did, Lee."

Manahorn said sourly, "Which do you want me to do, Gil, stop the rustling at your ranch or save your neck in saloon brawls? I can't do both."

Gil had one drink and poured himself another. He didn't look at Manahorn as he did it.

"That the first man you ever killed?" Manahorn asked.

"Yes," Gil said, staring morosely at his glass. "And I don't like the feeling."

Manahorn studied him, wondering why he didn't tell Gil that he was fed up with the deal. He had saved Gil's life tonight and that should even the score. But he knew he wouldn't back out now. He had taken the job and he would see it through.

"Ann wanted to see you about something today," Manahorn said, "but she got tired of waiting."

"I meant to see her, but Jacks was into me for so much that it slipped my mind."

Manahorn finished his drink and set the glass on the bar.

"I'd better get back to the ranch. I'm hoping we'll get a break tonight."

"I'll lock up and ride out with you."

THEY were leaving the saloon when Manahorn heard a racket outside. There was the swift pound of hoofs and by the time he and Gil reached the street, horses were racing away from the jail. Manahorn reached for his gun as he ran into the street, but the fleeing riders were going in the opposite direction and he knew the distance was too great.

"They've busted Nate out," Gil said, coming up beside him. "We'd better see about Ben."

Sheriff Doyle came staggering out of his office and was standing in front of the building, rubbing his head when Gil and Manahorn reached him.

"I wasn't looking for any trouble," Doyle said, glancing into the darkness. "Rich and Ed Wills didn't leave town like I told them to. They were waiting at the office when I got here with Nate, and one of them hit me over the head."

"It's not likely that you could have held Nate long," Manahorn said, frowning. "Why do you suppose he wanted out bad enough to pull a jail break?"

"Beats me," Doyle said. "But I'm not going after them tonight."

By the time they got back to the saloon, Lena Romay was pulling up at the rack on a Wagonwheel mount. The girl looked relieved when she saw that Ballard was all right.

"Thanks for fetching Lee," Gil said. "I was in a tight till he showed up."

Lena looked at Manahorn, watching him as he stepped into his saddle.

Gil explained what had happened. Then he said, "You'd better get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow."

Manahorn could feel the girl's eyes on him as he and Gil rode away from the saloon and headed toward Wagonwheel.

After Manahorn and Gil left town, Lena Romay was starting toward the hotel, when she saw Sheriff Ben Doyle coming down the street toward her.

"Are you all right, Ben?" Lena asked, noticing his unsteady walk.

The lawman nodded. "Got a lump on my head. Guess I'm lucky they didn't split my skull open." He rubbed his head while he looked at her. "I didn't say anything to Gil and Lee, Lena, but there was a fellow waiting in front of the jail for the Garsons."

"My brother?"

"I didn't get a good look, but I'd swear it was him." Doyle shook his head worriedly. "I hate to see the boy getting into trouble, but I'm afraid that's what'll happen if he don't shake loose from Rich Garson."

"I'll give him a good talking to, Ben."

A little later, Lena was riding out of town, heading for the Romay ranch in the hills. She'd tried talking to Cody yesterday about his behavior, but it seemed as if her brother was getting harder to handle all the time. When she had suggested he stop running with Rich Garson, Cody had told her he was a big boy now, able to choose his own friends.

Lena was worried and she blamed herself for not looking after Cody more than she had. She ought to be staying at the ranch. That was where she wanted to be, but she had to work to pay off the money she owed the bank, money she had borrowed to buy the outfit. After their folks died, she and Cody had left Texas and come here, arriving with very little money between them.

The ranch had taken Cody's eye, and he had made a lot of promises about settling down if he had something to work for. Lena had never been inside a saloon in her life, let alone worked in one. But she had a fair singing voice, so she had gone to Gil Ballard and talked him into putting her to work. It wasn't easy, standing up in front of a bunch of drunks and lettting them ogle you, but she had told herself it wouldn't be for long. As soon as she had the money paid back, she'd quit her job and she and Cody would work the ranch together.

She passed the Garson place, thinking that Cody might be there visiting with Rich, but the house was dark. She rode on up the creek and now her thoughts turned to Lee Manahorn. He didn't like her, she thought, and wondered why she was attracted to him. But there was something about his strong face that appealed to her, in spite of the way he treated her.

SHE CAME in sight of the ranch and her spirits lifted for a moment. There was plenty of water and good grass here. She

and Cody could build a prosperous outfit, if only he would settle down and tend to business. She would have to go on working a while longer because the place needed restocking, but it wouldn't be so hard if she knew they were getting ahead.

Lena came to the house then and saw the saddled horses in the back yard. Without hesitation she swung down and went to the door. It opened suddenly and Cody stood there, a gun in his hand, lamplight showing the caution in his face. Then, seeing who it was, Cody put his gun away, and said, "It's all right, boys. Only my sister."

The Garsons and Ed Wills were sitting at the kitchen table, eating bread and beans. Nate's mouth was full, and he chewed slowly while he looked at Lena.

"Get out of here," she said, letting them see the anger in her eyes. "All of you."

"Cody invited us here," Rich said. "And we ain't finished eating yet."

Lena stood there stiffly. "I don't care why you're here. I want you to leave."

Cody was standing with his back to the door. He said, "Now hold on a minute, sis. They're friends of mine."

"Fine kind of friends to have," Lena said without looking at him. "Nate Garson broke jail tonight and the sheriff said you were with the men that helped him escape."

Nate Garson was still chewing his mouthful of food, but his eyes were on Lena, and now he said, "You're getting yourself all worked up over nothing. Why don't you simmer down?"

Ignoring him, Lena turned an accusing stare on her brother. "Why do you want to waste your time with them, Cody? Can't you see that they'll just get you in trouble?"

Rich Garson wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He said with a thin smile, "Tell her, Cody."

Cody Romay seemed to have trouble looking at his sister. Finally he said, "They're pulling out tonight, sis, and I'm going with them."

Lena stared at him, her lips parted.

"I'm sorry, sis, but I can't see any future working myself to death on this outfit. I guess I just wasn't cut out for it."

Lena shot an accusing glance at the men at the table. "You've let them fill you full of a lot of big talk, Cody. Can't you see what they are, where you'll end up if you go away with them?"

"I've made up my mind, sis," Cody said, still avoiding her eyes.

The three at the table sat there grinning at her.

Lena walked past the table and into the front part of the house. There was a rifle there. She got it, her hands trembling a little as she checked to make certain it was loaded. With the rifle in her hands, she turned and went back to the kitchen. Anger was a tight coil inside her.

Nate Garson had pushed back from the table and sat rubbing his stomach. He said, "Reckon that'll hold me for awhile. We'd better be riding."

Cody, standing by the kitchen stove, turned to stare at Lena as she appeared in the doorway. The others, seeing Cody's surprise, swung around. For a moment it was very quiet in the room.

"I told you three to leave," Lena said, holding the rifle steadily. "I meant what I said."

"Now you be careful with that thing," Nate Garson said, scowling at her. "It might go off and hurt somebody."

"Damn it, sis," Cody said. "Put that gun away."

Lena shook her head. "They're getting out of here, Cody, and you're not going with them. If I have to, I'll shoot you to keep you here."

"Why try to hold me here when I told you I don't want to stay?"

"Because you're my brother, and I promised Dad that I'd look after you. Maybe I made a mistake, going to work and leaving you to run wild, but I didn't think you'd take up with men like these."

Cody Romay glanced uneasily at the Garsons.

Rich threw Cody a mocking glance. "You've been telling me how tough you were, kid, and here you are, letting a female buffalo you. What's the matter, kid, you getting cold feet?"

Cody flushed. He was torn by indecision, Lena could tell. He was just a boy trying to

grow up too fast. Looking steadily at him, she said, "What's it going to be, Cody?"

Cody was sweating, his face pale and wet in the lamplight.

Rich Garson got slowly to his feet, his hard eyes pinned on Lena.

"I'll show you how to handle women like this one, kid," Rich said, starting across the room. "You watch me and you'll learn something."

Lena took a step back, her finger tight on the trigger. But she couldn't squeeze it, try as she did. She had never shot anyone in her life, and the thought of it now turned her suddenly cold with fear.

"Get back, Lena warned. "Get back, or I'll—"

Rich Garson hesitated for an instant. Then suddenly he leaped forward, grabbed the rifle barrel and twisted it out of her hands. Lena fought him, kicking and scratching, while Rich stood there and laughed.

"Got a lot of fire, haven't you, baby?"

RICH tossed the rifle to his father. He grabbed Lena's arms and forced her up against the wall. Lena struggled, trying to break away, but she was helpless in his viselike grip.

"You got the gun away from her, Rich," Cody said. "Let her go."

"You see, kid," Rich said, without taking his eyes off Lena, "that kind of talk shows you're not as big as you let on. Hell, you've got to teach women like this one a few things. Now I'll show you how it's done."

Holding her with one hand, Rich used the other to slap her across the face. It was a hard, stinging blow that rocked Lena's head and caused her teeth to rattle. And Rich didn't stop. He kept slapping her, the sound popping loud in the silence.

"Damn you, Rich! Let her go!"

There was something in Cody Romay's voice this time that made Rich turn loose of the girl and swing around. Cody's face was white with fury.

Lena, her face burning, saw Cody's hand twitch. And realizing what anger was driving him to, she cried, "No, Cody!"

But it was too late to stop him. Cody's gun was coming up, and so was Rich Garson's. Lena's scream was lost in gun thunder. She stood there, staring wildly at her brother, watching him fall to the floor.

Nate Garson went over to Cody and knelt down, making a hasty examination.

Ed Wills, still sitting at the table, asked, "Is he dead?"

Nate straightened. "Deader than a doornail," he said, staring sharply at his son. "What did you do that for?"

"Hell, you saw him cutting down on me. I didn't think he had the guts. I couldn't just stand here and let him plug me."

Nate Garson cursed. "You've fixed things up for us real nice now."

"We didn't need him anyhow," Rich growled. "The three of us can get the cattle up there all right. And then we'll keep on going like we planned."

Lena stayed there against the wall, staring in horror at her brother and giving no thought to her own safety.

"What we going to do about the girl?" Ed Wills asked.

Nate Garson put his cold eyes on Lena, saying, "Take her in the other room and tie her up tight. Nobody's going to be coming by here tonight, and by tomorrow we'll be long gone."

Rich still had his gun in his hand. He said, "I don't like the idea of leaving her here to squawk to the sheriff."

Nate swore again. "Get that notion out of your head, you damned fool. You've messed things up enough already. Tie her up, like I told you, and let's get out of here."

When Rich turned toward her, Lena tried to duck past him and run to the door, but Rich caught her. He dragged her into the front room while Ed Wills went to his horse to get a rope. Rich threw her down on the floor and Lena stayed there, knowing it was useless to try fighting them any longer.

When they had bound her arms and legs securely, the three men lost no time in getting out of the house. She heard the sound of their horses and presently there was only silence.

She lay there on the floor, her hands tied behind her. When she tried to move, the rough rope cut into her flesh and she knew she could never get the knots loose. A sense of helplessness gripped her. But she kept

working her hands, biting her lips against the pain. Then suddenly she stopped and listened. A groan came from the kitchen, a barely audible sound, but it caused hope to rise in her.

"Cody!" she cried. "Cody!"

There was no answer, but she knew he was still alive, that Nate Garson, in his haste, had made a mistake. Lena rolled across the floor. She reached the doorway and wriggled through it. Now she could see him, lying there near the stove, his blood staining the floor.

Lena worked her way toward him, unmindful of the pain from the gnawing rope. She called his name and saw him move slightly.

"Cody, can you hear me?" She was close to him now. "It's Lena."

HE GROANED again, then opened his eyes and tried to focus them on her. Lena lay there, unable to get to her feet because her legs were drawn up behind her. She struggled, but Rich Carson had done a good job tying those knots. Cody needed her. She had to help him. She twisted her wrists but the rope held firm.

Cody's lips moved and then he whispered, "Sis, what—what happened?"

"Rich Garson shot you, Cody, and then they tied me up and left." She smiled at him with tears in her eyes. "Thanks for trying to stop him from manhandling me."

"I got—so mad—I couldn't see straight." Cody spoke with great difficulty. When his eyes focused on the knots that bound her he moaned and struggled to reach them. His face was white and twisted with pain, his hands shaking so that Lena thought he would never be able to untie her. While he worked at the knots, he talked to her.

"They've been rustling Wagonwheel cattle for months, sis, but now Manahorn is on to them and after that deal in town tonight, they've decided to leave the country."

"They mentioned cattle. Are they going to steal more tonight?"

"Already got them. They've made a deal over in Silverton. Nate will make that delivery tonight, and nobody will ever see them again."

Lena's back was to him and now she felt the ropes that bound her arms come loose. Quickly she untied her feet and turned to her brother. His strength gone, Cody had fallen back on the floor. When Lena reached toward him, he shook his head.

"It's too late to do anything for me, sis. Get out of here and let Manahorn know what the Garsons are up to."

"First I'm going to take care of you."

Lena got up, rubbing her wrists to restore the circulation. She found a clean dishtowel and hurried back to her brother. She knelt there beside him, working on him for a time before she realized that he was no longer breathing.

For a moment she crumpled over him. She felt numb and sick and her eyes were wet. Then she stood up resolutely. She got her horse and rode toward Wagonwheel.

On his way home, Gil Ballard was silent most of the time, and more sober than Manahorn had ever seen him. Killing a man, Manahorn thought, could hit you pretty hard. It could make you do some serious thinking.

It was late when they reached the ranch, but Manahorn had more riding ahead of him. He was tired, ready to hit his blankets, but Dave Olmes and his men were watching the west fence, and he had told them he would be at Soda Springs.

"Wait for me," Gil said when Manahorn explained where he was going. "As soon as I've seen Ann, I'll go with you."

"I'll grab a cup of coffee," Manahorn said, glancing toward the cook shack.

The coffee was hot and strong. He drank two cups and felt a little better. It wasn't likely the Garsons would try anything tonight, so he might as well ride out and tell Dave Olmes to bring his boys in. Standing in front of the cook shack, he could see the light in the big house, and then Gil came out.

Watching him approach, Manahorn was curious. There was a strange expression on Gil Ballard's face.

"Ann all right?" Manahorn asked.

"Sure, she's fine."

"Then what are you looking so funny about?"

Gil smiled. "I'm going to be a father, Lee.

That's why Ann went to see the doc today."

Manahorn grinned at him. "Congratulations."

"Can you imagine that?" Gil shook his head. "Somehow I never figured it would happen to me."

They went to the corral for fresh horses and while they were saddling, Gil said soberly, "I've played the fool long enough, Lee. I'm selling the saloon, and I'm going to start running this ranch the way I should have all the time."

"Glad to hear you say that, Gil," Manahorn said, fastening a cinch. "What about Lena Romay?"

"You know me, Lee, I never could resist a pretty face. But Lena wouldn't give me a tumble."

WHEN Manahorn didn't answer, Gil spoke again. "I know what you think of her, Lee, but you're wrong. She sings in the place and that's all. The only reason she went to work for me was because she wanted to help her brother get started on that ranch."

Manahorn, remembering some of the things he had said to Lena, felt a twinge of self-reproach.

They were leading their horses out of the corral when the sound of an incoming rider drew Manahorn's attention. It was probably Dave Olmes, he thought, and a moment later saw that he was wrong.

"Lena," Gil said when she reined up. "What's wrong?"

Quickly she explained what had happened, and told him that the Garsons and Ed Wills were moving the Wagonwheel cattle to Silverton.

Manahorn saw the grief in her eyes, and he felt sorry for her. He said gently, "You'd better go up to the house and stay with Ann."

He helped her dismount and for a moment she stood close to him. They looked at each other, neither of them speaking.

Then Manahorn and Gil Ballard were riding away from the house, heading across open country toward the hills. There were only a few hours of darkness left, and Manahorn knew it wasn't likely they would catch up with the Garsons short of Silverton. It was not far to the mining camp from the Garson place, and the men had a long head start.

Manahorn and Gil reached the mining camp shortly after eight o'clock the next morning. They pulled up for a minute, and Gil scanned the street.

"Where to?" he asked.

"First we'll stop at the meat market," Manahorn said. "Come on."

As they pulled up in front of the place, Manahorn saw Sam Acklebee, the man he had talked to yesterday, come out of the hotel which was directly across from the meat market. Acklebee was walking swiftly, but at sight of Manahorn the man slowed his pace. He glanced back at the hotel and seemed about to turn down the street when Manahorn called to him.

"Want to see you, mister."

Acklebee stopped beside the hitch-rack in front of his store. "I told you yesterday I don't know anything about your cattle," he said with a frown of annoyance. "Why do you keep pestering me?"

Manahorn gave him a level stare. "I told you I'd likely be back. This time I want some answers. How long since the Garsons have been here?"

The beefy Acklebee was sweating. "I told you I don't know anybody by that name. And with a business to look after, I can't stand here gabbing all morning."

When he started to turn away, Manahorn said sharply, "Hold on."

Acklebee stopped and looked uneasily at the two men. "I don't have to take anything off you. You're not the law."

"You're wrong," Gil said. "Show him, Lee."

Manahorn flashed his badge. He said, "All you've got here is a town constable, and you're probably paying him to keep his eyes closed. The show's over, Acklebee. One of Garson's men talked last night. He spilled everything about the deal they've been working with you."

Acklebee looked sick. "You haven't got anything on me. All I've been doing is buying beef from them."

"It was stolen beef," Gil said, "and you knew it."

"No I didn't." The sweat ran down into Acklebee's eyes. "The price was right, so I didn't ask any questions."

"All right," Manahorn said. "You talk fast and straight and you might get out of it."

Acklebee said, "Nate Garson worked out a deal with the Rafter 7 outfit. It's near here, run by a man out to make an easy dollar. He's holding the cattle, going to let me have them as I need them."

"And the Garsons?" Manahorn asked.

"They're at the hotel."

From the hotel a gun cut loose and Sam Acklebee, crying out as the bullet struck him, sprawled in the dirt.

MANAHORN yelled a warning to Gil and leaped away from the fallen man. While he was still on the move, Manahorn drew his gun. He had a glimpse of Ed Wills's face at the upstairs window.

Wills fired. his bullet kicking up dust at Manahorn's feet. Before he could pull the trigger again, Manahorn's gun roared, and Ed Wills came to his feet as the bullet hit him. The man plunged forward suddenly through the open window.

"Let's get over there," Manahorn said.

Manahorn and Gil, both with guns in their hands, entered the hotel lobby.

As they neared the stairway boots pounded along the second floor hall. A moment later Rich and Nate Garson appeared at the head of the stairway. The two men started down and then pulled up suddenly when they saw Manahorn and Ballard.

The Garsons fired, their lead whistling down the stairway. Manahorn jumped aside and pulled Gil with him. There was only silence now.

"I'm going up," Manahorn said. "You get around back in case they try to come out that way."

Gil nodded and turned quickly toward the front door.

Manahorn stepped into the open, his gun up and ready. As he started up the stairs he had a glimpse of the hotel clerk. The man was behind his desk, lying on the floor, shaking from head to foot.

Manahorn climbed the stairs, moving with caution, expecting one of the Garsons to leap out and take a shot at him. He reached the second floor in time to see Rich Garson going through a doorway at the far end of the hall.

"Hold up," Manahorn called.

Rich whirled around, firing as he turned. A bullet screamed past Manahorn's head and then his own gun was kicking in his hand. He fired twice and saw Rich Garson drop his pistol and claw at his chest. After taking a few staggering steps toward Manahorn, Rich fell on his face. He was dead by the time Manahorn reached him.

The doorway through which Rich had been leaving opened onto an outside stairway. Manahorn heard the sound of gunfire and ran out in time to see Nate Garson plunging down the stairway. He came to a stop at the bottom and lay in a twisted heap.

Gil Ballard, a smoking gun in his hand, stood there at the foot of the stairs.

When they returned to the street, Manahorn stopped and watched a rider coming toward them. It was Lena Romay. The girl looked worried until she saw them and then her face brightened.

"You should have stayed at Wagonwheel," Manahorn told her. "You must be tired."

"I couldn't stand staying there, not knowing what might happen to you." She glanced at Gil. "Ann wanted to come with me, but I talked her out of it."

"I'd better get back," Gil said, "and let her know I'm all right." He started toward his horse and then swung back, smiling at them. "You won't find me in town any more, Lee, but drop around at the ranch, and I'll make it right with you."

He was gone then and Manahorn stood there looking at Lena Romay. He saw something in her eyes that had been there all along, but he had been too blind to see it. He'd sell his saddle shop, he thought, and she could quit her job at the saloon. It was plain to him now that she didn't belong there.

He started to tell her his plans for them as they rode out of the camp together, heading toward the valley.

To Know The

ADELLA wanted to prove she was as smart as any man . . .

and she proved it to all but the one who counted most

PEOPLE say that there's nothing like the power of the press, but certainly it is equaled by the power of a woman, and when you put the two together you have a nearly unbeatable combination as the citizens of Peachtree Springs found out.

There were no peach trees in Peachtree Springs. Discounting a few greasewood bushes, there were no trees at all. The town took its name from Alan Peachtree. Few would deny he was its leading citizen, though many people thought he deserved tar and feathers for letting down his town and Cap Walker.

Alan was big and young, and he had a shock of red hair and gray, trusting eyes. He looked on all men as friends and brothers, and to his thinking a man without friends might as well be dead.

Peachtree perched in a narrow canyon in the Funeral range, surrounded by the most barren stretch of real estate in North America. Below it, like an uneasy furnace, the drifting sand of Death Valley sent up its pulsing heat vapors to meet the cloudless sky. It was remote, and harsh, and only the craziest miners and prospectors, thieves and murderers were attracted when the news leaked out that Alan had found a quartz outcropping with good values in both gold and silver.

But there are always enough desperate men attracted by the smell of gold, and they took off from Rhyolite and Tonopah and Goldfield, pushing their horses and wagons and burros across the raw hills.

One stubborn character even arrived trundling his mother-in-law in a wheel barrow. It wasn't, he explained to the delighted citizens who welcomed him, that he liked his mother-in-law so much, but everyone knew that she was the best blackjack dealer in the Southwest, and a man simply could not leave an asset like that behind.

Within six weeks the town had twelve saloons and three thousand inhabitants, and Alan's mine tunnel was nearly a hundred feet into the hill. In the seventh week Peachtree Springs gained a newspaper and the prettiest girl south of San Francisco. Willard Gilbert was responsible for both these additions.

Gilbert was a man of education and refinement and connections. It was rumored falsely that he had helped to interest Eastern capitalists in the development of Goldfield, and the boys did not see why he could not work a like miracle for Peachtree. Willard Gilbert was eager to try.

"Alan," he said, "I have arrived in time to make you rich."

TRUTH

By
TODHUNTER BALLARD

The crowd stared at her sullenly, but she wouldn't back down an inch

Alan Peachtree blinked. "Now, that's right nice of you." He had just come from the mine where he had labored for twelve full hours. His shirt was stained, his hands dirty and his big body so weary that he leaned on the pick handle which he always carried as another man might carry a cane. He grinned. "I'm sorry but I guess you are a mite late. I've already got it made."

Willard Gilbert laughed. He was a dapper man who had a charming way of laughing at people without offending them. "You've got it made! Why Alan, my friend, you no more have it made than the man about to jump from Brooklyn Bridge has already won his bet. You have been lucky enough to find a mine, but that is only the first step. You need capital and machinery. You need one million dollars to develop this camp properly. Do you have a million dollars, Alan?"

"No," said Alan.

"I don't either," said Gilbert. "But I have the next best thing. I have a list of people who have already invested in gold mines, and it is proven that once a man is a sucker he continues to be so."

Alan chuckled. "I've heard of such lists," he admitted. "But when I go in for robbery I'll be honorable and hold up the stage."

"Who's talking about robbery?" Willard Gilbert managed to sound indignant. "I'll admit that in isolated cases some unscrupulous persons have been known to take mild advantage of a few widows and orphans, but I'm a broker, not a crook. You do believe that mine is rich, don't you?"

"If I didn't I wouldn't be working it twelve hours a day."

"Then don't be a hog. Alan, you have a lot of friends here."

Alan's smile got warm. It always made him feel good to know how many friends he had. "Well, I guess the boys kind of like me."

"And you are letting them down."

Alan was getting confused. "How do you mean?"

"It's very simple," said Gilbert. "How many people do you employ in the mine?"

"Thirty-seven."

"The three thousand people in Peachtree are living on money and groceries they brought with them, but that won't last forever. What will happen to them then? They'll move away. The town will die. You don't want Peachtree to die, do you?"

"Well of course not," said Alan, "but—"

"Now supposing we sell a million dollars worth of stock in the Peachtree Mining Company. With the money we put a lot more men to work and open up the mine properly. We build a mill so we don't have to haul our ore to Rhyolite, and maybe even a railroad from the Tonopah branch. That will employ a lot of men and make the stockholders rich when we get out the ore. That isn't all."

"Isn't it?" said Alan.

Willard Gilbert sounded triumphant. "All the ground for miles around here has been staked for mineral claims. Once the rest of the country hears about Peachtree and your fabulous mine investors will race to share in the district. Values will go up. The whole thing rests on your shoulders. You just can't let your friends down."

Alan saw that Willard Gilbert was right. He saw where his duty lay. But he was still a little puzzled. "Just how do all these investors find out about the mine?"

"That's my job," said Gilbert. "I know a man named Walker who owns a printing press. He helped to publicize Wonder and Belmont, and Rawhide. He is a genius at making a gopher hole sound like the richest mine in the world. We will mail his paper to my list of investors for a couple of months, then we will hit them with the stock." He stopped, he hesitated, he colored slightly.

"There is one small difficulty. He has a couple of loans against the press. He will have to have one hundred dollars before his creditors will let him move."

Alan did not have one hundred dollars, but the embarrassment was resolved by appealing to the public spirit of the camp's citizens assembled in the largest saloon. Even the poorest prospector realized that Peachtree should have a voice to tell the world the wonders of the new camp. They contributed, and they lined the dusty track which served as the main street to see the new publisher arrive.

CAP WALKER looked like an undersized, angry billy goat. He was not young. During his years of drifting from one mining camp to the next, the desert air had dried the little meat he had left until his bones were encased in a substance resembling well-cured jerky.

He arrived, his type cases and press and composing stone loaded into a wagon which threatened to disintegrate at each turn of its squealing wheels. The horses which pulled it up the narrow twists of the canyon were so lean and tired that only an optimist of Cap's caliber would have bothered to buckle them into harness.

But Cap had been chasing the rainbow for sixty years, and although he had not yet seen the mine he was firmly convinced that Peachtree was his El Dorado. He bowed and waved to the cheering throng, failing to realize that the cheers were all for the girl who sat on the high wagon seat at his side.

Her head was bare so that her golden hair

glistened in the sun. Her eyes were blue, her smooth face pleasing to the eye, and the ankles peeking from under the hem of her long skirt were trim.

Adella Walker was excited. The sight of the straggling board shacks, the rock houses and dugouts, which the men had scooped for themselves from the canyon's walls, did not shock her. She was 18, fresh from the East, seeing her father for the first time in fifteen years.

"My, you are popular," she said, returning the waves from the crowd. "Who's the big red-headed man before that tent marked hotel?"

Cap did not know. "The man beside him is named Gilbert. He is a financier, and he brought us here. You be nice to him."

Adella was not listening. She had turned her head to watch Alan Peachtree. For his part Alan had not taken his eyes from her face since the wagon had come into view. But for that matter neither had Willard Gilbert, nor anyone else in the crowd.

"Who is she?" Alan's voice had a dreamy quality. "She's pretty."

Willard Gilbert could only suspect that she was Walker's daughter, although he had not known that Cap was even married.

He glanced at Alan and knew he was looking at a young man already in love. He was not surprised since from the instant he had seen her tenderness had stirred in his own breast.

The one thing in the world Gilbert was not was slow-witted, and in the few minutes it took the swaying wagon to traverse the two block street and pull up before the shack where Gilbert had already erected the sign, "Print Shop," he had decided two things. He meant to have this girl for himself, and he had to figure some way to head Alan off before the miner made his own pitch. He took a chance.

"She's Walker's daughter," he said, hoping that he was right. "And we're engaged."

Alan was startled. "Engaged?"

"It's a secret." Gilbert peered at the crowd around them. "Her father doesn't want her to marry until she's older, and if he knew that we were promised to each other he would never have brought her here."

"Gee! I won't tell anyone. I—"

Willard Gilbert squeezed his arm. "It isn't every man I'd tell, but you are my friend and I know you won't go behind my back."

Alan was suddenly miserable. In one moment he had seen the most glorious girl in the world, and in the next learned that she belonged to his dear friend, and a man simply could not court his friend's girl.

He would have turned away, but Gilbert still held his arm. "I promised her that I would tell no one. You won't mention it, Alan?"

"Of course not," said Alan Peachtree. So Alan was the only citizen of the camp who failed to crowd around to make the new editor and his daughter welcome, and Adella looked in vain for the big red-headed man. Alan was in the mine tunnel, trying by an excess of work to forget that he had seen her.

Willard Gilbert was in the forefront of the reception committee. He directed the willing volunteers as they horsed the old hand press off the wagon and set up the type cases in the shack's front room. He stood by as Walker introduced his daughter. Adella accepted the introduction with grace and then disappeared into the rear rooms to try to make them livable. With her gone, the boys drifted away until Cap and Willard Gilbert were alone.

"Didn't know you had a daughter," Gilbert said.

"Almost forgot it myself." Cap was sorting some of the type which had been scrambled in the moving. "Ain't seen her since she was three. Her ma didn't like mining camps and took her back to St. Louis."

"Why'd you bring her here?"

Cap looked surprised, his old jaws working automatically on his chew. "What's wrong with Peachtree? Looks like it has the makings of a right smart camp."

GILBERT saw the fruitlessness of explaining that Peachtree was not the place for a refined young lady. Most of Cap's life had been spent in towns like Peachtree, and he loved them.

"Besides," said Cap. "I was just ready to pull out of Goldfield, when she came in on the train. Seems her ma had died, and she'd come out to see if I was still alive. I couldn't

leave her there alone. Too many fancy gambling men around."

Gilbert nodded. "A woman should be married to live out here."

Cap considered, spitting thoughtfully at a knot hole in the floor. He hit it. "Guess you're right. I'll have to kind of look around and pick out a likely prospect."

"What about me?"

"Well now," said Cap. "That's right gentlemanly of you, but I didn't intend to look quite so high. I figured maybe a storekeeper. If a storekeeper goes broke he can at least eat his stock."

Willard Gilbert laughed. "Cap, with your permission I'll pay court to her, and after we clean up here I'll give her so many diamonds she won't even need a dress under them. Then, if I go broke she can eat the diamonds."

Cap ran a twisted hand through his white hair. "Well now, I guess that's better than she deserves. But I got to warn you she has some peculiar ideas. She seems to think that women are just as good as men. She wants to learn to set type, and write articles. I tried to tell her that running a newspaper is man's business, and she laughed."

Willard Gilbert was not concerned. He said, "Never saw the woman I couldn't handle. You get your press cranked up, Cap. I've made some notes for the first issue. Run five thousand. I'd like to get them out on the mail stage day after tomorrow. Lay it on thick, Cap, anything you wrote about Rawhide or Wonder goes double here. We're going to build this into the greatest camp in the whole West."

Alan Peachtree met Adella Walker three days later, and the earth did not shake nor any buildings fall down, quite. In Alan's hand was the smudged copy of number one, volume one of the Peachtree Sentinel. Under the head, in smaller type was the legend, To Know the Truth Is to Be Free.

Below that was the information that it was a journal for thinking people, issued every Friday, twenty-five cents per copy, Captain Amos Walker, Prop. Adella Walker, Asso. Editor.

There was very little local news, and Cap had had no time to gather what there was. Most of the four pages were filled with a glowing account of the town, and of its prospects. There was a write-up of Alan Peachtree, telling how he had gone to Alaska when he was only 14 and how, two years later, he had come down to Tonopah and worked in the mines, learning his trade, and then gone prospecting, finding, the paper said, the most promising mine since Montgomery discovered the Shoshone.

Another article told of the shipment of ten tons of ore which had been hauled over the mountains to the mill and returned $5,200 to the ton.

"You're Mr. Peachtree," Adella said. "This is the first time I've had a chance to speak to you."

Alan blushed.

Adella noted the blush and was pleased. It meant that this big red-headed man had noticed her. She gave him her brightest smile. "What do you think of our paper?"

He gulped, dazzled by the smile. "It's right fancy, and your pa certainly knows his language, but he made one small mistake. That ore shipment, he's got too many oughts. It brought five hundred and twenty a tone, not five thousand."

She said, "Pa didn't make that mistake. Willard Gilbert did. I know, I set up that story myself from his notes. I'm learning to be a printer."

Alan admired her, forgetting all about the extra cipher. "You're smart. I didn't know girls came as smart as you."

She bridled at once. "What makes you think they aren't as smart as men?"

"Why, I didn't say that. I—"

"You're like all men. You think you're so vastly superior."

"I don't. I didn't say—"

"Let me tell you something, Mr. Peachtree. For years men have run the world, but that day is rapidly coming to an end. You and I will both live to see the women get the vote."

"The vote?" Alan was really shocked. He was used to mining camps where the polling place was a saloon, and where votes were often bought for a drink and a cigar. "Miss Walker, you don't really mean that!"

She almost stamped her foot. "I'm learning to run a newspaper, so I'll be ready to help in the great crusade."

Alan spoke without thinking. "What will Gilbert say about that?"

She stared at him, not understanding "What has Mr. Gilbert to do with it?"

ALAN could have bitten his tongue. He had promised his friend that he would not let the girl know he knew of her secret engagement. He fumbled for words and, finding none, fled.

Adella Walker stared after him. She simply did not understand Alan Peachtree, and it bothered her.

But she had no trouble understanding Willard Gilbert. He wasted no time in attempting to further his suit. Not that he lacked competition, for every unmarried man in the district and several who probably had wives elsewhere found reasons to come into the print shop. The only one who failed to appear was Alan Peachtree, and Adella mentioned this one morning of the third week after their arrival.

She had been setting up an article comparing the new mine with the other great strikes, and she turned to find her father and Gilbert in conference at the high counter.

"What's the matter with this Alan Peachtree? Does he think he's better than anyone else just because he was lucky enough to find a mine?"

Willard Gilbert had just returned from Goldfield where he had had printed one million shares of Peachtree Mining Company stock. It was beautiful stock, all green and purple and gold ink with a big nugget pictured in the center, and Cap Walker had been admiring it. He looked around at his daughter, startled.

"Why, I thought he was a real nice fellow. He bought me three drinks only last night."

"And this morning he crossed the street just to keep from meeting me." She was really angry. "No elongated miner is going to high-hat me."

Willard Gilbert had had quite a lot of experience with women, and he recognized the signs. Knowing Alan, he guessed what was the matter and why he was avoiding the girl. He cursed under his breath. Even with her father's enthusiastic backing Adella had shown no particular interest in Gilbert's attentions.

"Alan's a peculiar person," he said. "He—

DUE CREDIT

By LIMERICK LUKE

Whatever success I attain in this life,
I'm sure I shall owe to my dear wedded wife.
She cherishes, loves and advises me well—
And also reminds me what jokes not to tell!

he hates women, to begin with."

She was at once interested. "Hates them, why?"

Willard Gilbert searched his mind desperately for the right answer. "Maybe it was that Indian girl, up in Alaska."

"Indian girl?"

He said slowly, "I don't know as I should tell about it. It isn't a thing a man like Peachtree wants noised around. The boys think he's a real great person, and I believe he is, and a man should be allowed one mistake.

"I guess he married her, only when he decided to come back to the states he couldn't bring her with him. So he left her and the kids and—"

"I guess I don't want to hear it." Adella had risen. Her face was white and her mouth set. She walked around the press and disap-

peared into their living quarters. Cap Walker was staring at Willard Gilbert with an odd expression on his old nutcracker face.

"Son," he said, "that was kind of a low blow."

Willard Gilbert swung to face him, and suddenly his face was no longer pleasant. His eyes were cold and hard and dangerous.

"Don't get in my way, Cap."

Walker spat at the knot hole in the floor. He hit it.

"You don't want your daughter married to a big dumb prospector? You've seen Peachtree's kind in every camp in Nevada. One week they own the biggest mine in the land, the next they can't feed their burros."

"I suppose so."

"You just publish your paper. Two more issues and then I start sending out letters and wires to the customers. I promised to give you ten percent, Cap. Think of it. Ten percent of a million."

Cap was thinking of it. He was thinking of all the years he had dragged the battered press from one camp to the next. He knew what he should do. He should plant his boot directly in the seat of Willard Gilbert's fancy pants, but he was a weak man. His wife had always said so. However, on one point he would be strong. Adella would not marry Willard Gilbert.

Yet it seemed that even in this he was wrong, for on that very evening the girl accepted Gilbert. Her acceptance came as a complete surprise to herself. They were walking along the ridge above the mine and although the sun was down there was still light.

In this light they saw Alan Peachtree come out of the mine building and stand outlined on the breast of the rising dump, staring out across the barren hills, looking big and powerful and confident.

It was this self-confidence, which in the girl's eyes was arrogance, that made her turn and suddenly squeeze Gilbert's hand.

Gilbert looked at her, surprised. Then, as if realizing that his moment had arrived, he slipped an arm about her shoulders. "Marry me, Adella. Let me take you out of this forsaken country."

She nodded. At least afterward she could not be certain that she had spoken, and Gilbert bent his head to kiss her. It was at that moment that Alan turned and saw them on the hillside above him, distinctly visible in the day's afterglow. For a moment he stared, then he turned and plunged back into the mine.

He already had enough to worry him, for that morning the vein had faulted. They had run into a rock dyke. Alan had seen these dykes before, solid dams of rock which thrust up through the earth, cutting like a wall through all the strata.

THE QUESTION was whether when they had cut through the barrier they would pick up the vein on the other side, or whether the mountain had at some prehistoric time slipped so that the vein was lost forever.

He and his men labored grimly, drilling into the rock, setting their shots and mucking out the debris. They all knew that the future of many people depended on what they found beyond the dyke.

None of them spoke about it as they came off shift, but four days later when they had drilled nearly ten feet and still the dyke showed no signs of ending, Alan hunted up Willard Gilbert.

He said, "About that stock you got printed. You'd better hold up offering it for sale until we see if we have a mine or not."

Gilbert stared at him. "What's the matter?"

Alan told him.

"What are the chances that you'll pick up the vein?"

Alan shrugged.

"Get back underground and keep working," said Gilbert. "And don't worry about the stock."

Alan nodded, relieved. "I knew you'd see it my way."

Willard Gilbert hardly waited until Alan was gone before he hurried to the print shop. "You've got to rush this week's issue," he told Cap Walker. "You have to get it ready for the mail coach tomorrow morning. I'll go up to Goldfield and send out the letters offering the stock."

Cap stared at him. "What's the rush?"

"The vein faulted. They hit a rock dyke, and they can't pick it up. We've got to move fast, before anyone finds out."

"Does Alan know?"

Gilbert was impatient. "Of course. He tipped me off."

He turned. "Not a word to anyone, mind." Then he was gone. He wanted to pack his things and the stock. He meant to ride out on the mail coach to Goldfield.

Cap went back to the composing stone, and had hardly reached it when the door to the living quarters opened and Adella stepped through.

"You aren't going to do it."

He looked at her dully. "Gilbert promised me ten percent."

She said angrily, "You wouldn't do it for one hundred percent, because I wouldn't let you. And I certainly won't let you do it for a couple of crooks like Gilbert and Alan Peachtree. I should have realized he was dishonest from the first. Him and his Indians."

Cap gave her a strange look. "What are we going to do?"

She said, "I'll show you. Get the biggest type we have." She set the head herself. It read:

PEACHTREE GOES BUST
VEIN PETERS OUT

"Now," she said. "That will fix them."

Cap stared at the type. "What about the rest of the paper?"

She said, "You haven't broken up the forms from last week yet. Run them. After they read that headline nothing else matters."

Her father nodded slowly. It was, he realized, the end of another dream, another mining camp which would gradually return to dust. He got the forms and substituted the new head into the old front page, then he started the press, his daughter addressing the papers as they came damp from under the roller.

They carried them to the post office as soon as it opened, and saw them thrust safely into the mail sacks. As they came out, Willard Gilbert appeared from the hotel, carrying two heavy suitcases, and walked toward where the horses were just being put to the stage.

Adella went to meet him, a paper folded under her arm. He stopped, smiling at her quickly. "Honey," he said, "I was just coming to see you. I have to go to Goldfield, but your father can bring you over there to meet me. He'll explain."

She pulled out the paper and unfolded it. "Maybe you'd better take a look at this."

He stared at the smudged sheet, at the glaring headline, and his eyes bulged. He looked at Cap, standing uneasily behind his daughter.

"Why, you double-crossing old fool!"

"I made him do it," said Adella. "A newspaper should tell the truth. It shouldn't be used by thieves."

Gilbert had caught sight of the postmaster carrying the bulky mail sacks to the stage. "Are those the papers? You can't mail those!"

The postmaster stopped and looked at him. "They're all mailed, and me or you or nobody is going to open them sacks."

Gilbert hesitated for a moment, then he was shouting at the man, rushing toward him, trying to wrestle the sacks from his grasp.

A CROWD was collecting. There was seldom excitement in Peachtree, and several of the first arrivals tried to pull Gilbert back. He turned on them, flourishing the now tattered paper. "You fools, read that. If this news gets out we're all ruined. The town is ruined."

The crowd was growing, now encircling the stage. Gilbert quit trying to recover the sacks alone. He saw his chance. He made a speech.

"They'll find the vein again," he said, "only when they do it will be too late, because once this lying paper gets distributed you couldn't sell stock in this camp for a dime a bale."

A mutter of anger swelled through the crowd.

"Get the papers and burn them. Give this double-crossing old goat a coat of tar and feathers, so he doesn't make the mistake again."

The crowd moved forward. The postmaster retreated to the top of the coach, showing that it was illegal to destroy United States mail. Adella took one look, then she ducked into the post office and grabbed the shotgun that was kept behind the desk.

She came back out, firing one barrel over the crowd, then threatening them with the

other. They stared at her, angrily, sullenly, while Willard Gilbert shrieked at them to get the mail sacks.

It was the shot which brought Alan on the run. He had just left the mine after working all night. He did not know what was happening, but he saw the girl with the gun and the crowd seeming to threaten her. He was carrying his pick handle as usual, and he did not stop to ask questions. He came charging in like a tornado, yelling as he came.

Adella had never seen Alan in a fight before. Few in Peachtree had. Men gave before him as he twirled the pick handle around his head. Some started to run, others followed until in a matter of minutes the space around the stage was practically deserted. But Willard Gilbert stood his ground.

"Alan," he said, "Keep out of this. I'm going to have those mail sacks and I'm going to burn them."

Alan glanced at the girl and Cap. "What's going on?"

Adella said bitterly, "As if you didn't know. I merely wrote the truth, that your vein has faulted. Only this—this—" She looked at Gilbert, unable to find words to describe him. "He wants to burn the papers, so you and he can sell your worthless stock."

"I see," said Alan.

"So help me drag those sacks down," said Gilbert desperately.

There was a small smile on Alan's face. "I never quarrel with a lady, and I won't let you either. Move on, Willard."

Willard Gilbert was playing for high stakes. Willard Gilbert lost his head. He brushed back his long coat tails and pulled the gun which swung at his hip. "Don't make me shoot you, Alan."

Anyone seeing his eyes would not have doubted that he would do just that. The girl had lowered her shotgun once the crowd had faded, and Alan was between her and Gilbert anyway.

They stood there, only inches apart, Alan with his pick handle resting on the ground, Gilbert with his gun in his hand. And then Cap Walker from five feet away spat his brown stream of tobacco juice directly at Gilbert's eyes. He hit them, and Gilbert dropped the gun, mopping frantically as the fiery juice blinded him.

He was still nearly blind half an hour later when he rode out on the stage minus his suitcases of stock. He did not look back, or he would have seen Alan Peachtree with his arm around the girl's shoulders.

"And all the time," said Alan happily, "I thought you were engaged to him."

Adella laughed. "And I thought you were married to an Indian whom you deserted!"

Cap spat at a lizard. He hit it. "Shucks," he said, "you should have read the article in the paper which said Alan went to Alaska at fourteen and stayed two years. You ain't very smart. You could have figured he wouldn't marry many Indians in that time."

The girl smiled, then sobered. "But I practically called you a crook, and the town is ruined, and—"

Alan stopped her. "I been so busy I forgot to tell you. We broke through the dyke this morning, and found the vein on the other side and it's twice as big as it was."

"Oh, Alan."

"And it's all ours. If Gilbert had sold that stock I'd have only got twenty thousand in cash and a hundred thousand shares. Now we'll see what we take out."

They took out a half a million, which was fortunate because after that Alan gave up mining, and all the rest of their lives they ran a newspaper. There's not much money in that.

RANCH
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TALK

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HIS NAME was worth more to him than her love or her fortune

"We mustn't," Rachael cried. "I'm promised."

KINGDOM

AT THE AGE of 28, having prospered moderately by hard work plus ability to make a sharp trade, Adam Crockett decided that wider opportunity awaited him on the Western frontier. He arrived in Basin City on a bright spring morning, bringing with him 56 young bulls acquired in his native country along the Ohio river.

Including freight to Basin City on the new railroad, Adam estimated his investment in the bulls at slightly more than 58 dollars each. The bulls, a saddle horse, 106 dollars in pocket and a valise packed with personal effects constituted his entire earthly wealth.

After his animals had been unloaded in the railroad stock pens, Adam went to the depot and learned from the agent that there would be a charge of ten cents per day per animal.

Back at the pens, Adam found a shabby, bewhiskered old man astride a roan horse, looking over the bulls.

"Howdy," the man greeted him. "If you're the fellow that

A NOVELETTE

By Seven Anderton

owns these critters I got good hay to sell at five dollars a ton, case you need it."

"I own them," Adam replied, "and I'll need some hay. My name's Adam Crockett."

"I'm Elias Edwards," the other said, sizing up Adam with sharp, deep-set gray eyes.

Adam was a good-looking youngster with tawny blond hair and blue eyes. Creases in his tanned cheeks made parentheses about a humorous mouth. He was wide of shoulder and narrow of hip and topped six feet by an inch or more. There was a devil-may-care air about him and a friendly twinkle in his eyes. Gray homespun pants, hightopped, flat-heeled, laced boots, a faded hickory shirt and a low-crowned felt marked him as a newcomer to the range country.

"First class animals," Edwards observed. "What you figure on doin' with 'em?"

"Haven't made up my mind," Adam replied, "and I'm not going to be in any hurry."

"In case you decide to have a sale," Edwards said, "I do most of the auctioneerin' hereabouts. Charge a penny on the dollar."

"I might be interested later on," Adam said. "Right now I've got to try to rent a holding pen."

"I got a lot south of here," Edwards cut in. "It's pole-fenced, and there's hay mangers and a good tank with a windmill to keep it full. I rent it to horse traders and such for a dollar a day or fifteen dollars a month. You want to rent it, I'll help you drive your stuff over."

"I'll saddle my horse and go have a look," Adam said.

Thirty minutes later Adam and Edwards let the bulls out of the shipping pens and started driving them towards Elias' lot.

Edwards' lot was at the south edge of town, where the main street became a well-used trail leading across the rangeland. The gate to the lot had been left open, and as Adam and Edwards hazed the herd towards it three riders drew up in the trail. Behind them a wagon, drawn by a sturdy team of mares, had also been halted by its driver. One of the mounted trio shouted, "Want us to head them into your lot, Edwards?"

"Obliged if you will, Aaron," Edwards called back.

The three riders spread apart to block the road and sat watching as the bull herd passed them to enter the open gate. Helping to push along the stragglers, Adam found his gaze caught by a girl who was one of the obliging trio. She was young, not more than twenty, Adam thought, and a beauty. The way she handled her mettlesome sorrel mount told that she was a seasoned horsewoman.

WHEN the bulls were in the lot and Elias Edwards had closed the gate behind them, Adam was still eyeing the girl. He had never expected to see anyone so beautiful except in his dreams. Small and slim, she was, with dark eyes and raven-black hair. Her tiny feet were encased in expensive kid boots. Her divided skirt was of tan whipcord and her blouse a soft rose color.

The man Edwards had called Aaron spoke. "You the man that owns these bulls?"

Adam was speechless for a long moment because his eyes had met the dark ones of the girl. Then hers fell to the small hands resting on her saddle horn.

"Yes," Adam answered, "they're mine. I'm Adam Crockett."

"My name's Aaron Jacob," the other said. "Your animals for sale? Mind if I ride in and look them over?"

"They're not in very good shape right now," Adam said. "Just been unloaded after a week on trains."

"I can see that," Jacob replied, "but they look like well-bred stuff that I could use."

"You're welcome to look them over," Adam said. "I brought them here to sell or swap."

Jacob urged his mount ahead, and Edwards opened the gate to let him enter the lot. Aaron Jacob was a thick-bodied man of swarthy complexion with threads of gray in his dark hair and mustache. His range garb was of good quality but not flashy. He sat his horse with the air of one accustomed to command. For five minutes he rode among the bulls, scattering and surveying them. It was evident that he knew cattle.

Adam Crockett kept flicking glances towards the girl on the sorrel, but she was talking to the other mounted man, and he did not catch her eye again. Then Aaron Jacob rode back

to the gate and Edwards let him out.

"How much do you want for my pick of twelve?" Jacob asked Adam flatly.

Adam turned his horse to get his eyes off the girl and his mind on business.

"I might take fifteen," Jacob added, "when I get to picking."

Adam's brows knitted. Later he wondered just what all he had thought about during that brief moment of hesitation before he said, "Hundred and fifty a head and take as many as you want."

The words were barely spoken before Adam wondered why he had said them. He had only hoped to get double his money for the animals—probably even less.

"Too much," Jacob said promptly and flatly. "You'll never get it."

"Might be," Adam replied. "But that's my price—anyhow until I look around a little. I'm told folks hereabouts don't turn out their bulls for a couple of months yet, so there's no rush."

"We breed early and shelter our heavy cows to have calves old enough to nibble the first grass," Jacob told him. "I plan to turn the bulls with the herds next week. I'll give you a hundred a head cash for twelve to fifteen of these, and I'll drive them home this evening."

Adam though of his short cash reserve, but shook his head. "No. I just got here. Want some time to look around."

"I'll ride past here on my way home, around three o'clock," Jacob said. "Think it over. You may change your mind." He put his horse past Adam and rode up the street, accompanied by the girl and the other rider and followed by the wagon.

"None of my business, young fellow," Elias said, "but that price—"

"Who is that girl?" Adam cut him off, his gaze still following the departing cavalcade.

ELIAS chuckled. "Sort of hits a fellow's eye, don't she? But you'd better look the other way. She's Aaron Jacob's daughter and the queen of Jacob's Kingdom. Her name's Rachael, and she's got Dave Avery about ready to enter the Kingdom. Ain't no chance there for you."

"What the hell are you talkin' about?" Adam snapped. "What is Jacob's Kingdom?"

"Quite a place," Elias replied. "Before you're here long you'll hear plenty about it. Lot of things you hear won't be true, but what is true is plenty remarkable. I'll tell you about it sometime, but if you want that load of hay for these critters to do 'em any good today I better go fetch it."

"I haven't had breakfast yet, so I'll go to town and eat now," Adam said. "Where's a reasonable place to get a room? My stuff is still at the depot."

"The Basin House fits a feller pretty good for four dollars a week," Elias told him.

Adam liked what he saw of Basin City, while he was establishing himself at the Basin House and eating at a restaurant. The bustling cowtown had a population of a thousand or more. It was trading, shipping and meeting point for the greater portion of Bluestem Basin's vast expanse of rangeland, and it was neither more nor less wild and woolly than hundreds of other similar communities in the raw frontier. Except for curious glances at his outlander garb, nobody paid Adam Crockett much attention.

When he returned to the lot shortly after two o'clock he was freshly shaved and arrayed in the best and cleanest of his wardrobe, plus a new Stetson. Rachael Jacob might be with her father when Aaron made his promised stop at the lot. Rachael had not been completely out of Adam's mind since the moment he first saw her. He wondered why Aaron had not introduced him to her and the others of the party.

He found Elias at the yard, filling salt boxes. That done, the oldster climbed the windmill tower with an oil can. He was still on the platform, oiling the gears, when the Jacob party, including Rachael, rode up. The wagon was now loaded with supplies. Aaron Jacob left the others in the road and turned his horse to where Adams stood by the gate.

"Well, Crockett," Aaron asked, "you want to let me have the bulls?"

"At my price." Adam had torn his gaze from the girl at Aaron's approach.

Jacob shrugged. "Made you my top offer. I'd like to have those young animals right now, but it looks like we can't do business."

"Maybe we can," Adam said. "I got a notion I might do some trading. Right now you only need bulls for a month or so—anyhow you'll be done with them before most other ranchers want them. I'll let you take as many as you want at a dollar a head a day. Then if we can make a deal or do some swapping later on, you won't need to pay the rent on the ones you keep."

Jacob rubbed his blue jaw and sat silent for a long moment. Then he said with sudden decision, "It's a deal. And I'll take twenty. Time our old bulls were fattened off anyhow. You and Edwards help cut them out. We three can drive them home."

Elias came scrambling down from his listening post. Some pole panels were set up as a sorting chute and half an hour later the Jacob party was ready to depart with the twenty chosen animals.

Before the sorting starting, Aaron Jacob introduced Rachael and the other two men, his brother Lige and his cousin Cal. The girl gave Adam a quick smile.

AS THEY prepared to let the chosen bulls out onto the road, Aaron Jacob said to Adam, "Edwards can tell you the way to our place. Ride out when you get ready to settle up."

"You got any good heifer stuff?" Adam asked.

"Jacob cattle," Aaron replied, "are the best in this country. Ask Edwards."

As the drive moved southward down the trail, Adam's eyes followed the shapely girl, riding as though she were part of her mount.

"That," Elias Edwards spoke at Adam's elbow, "was a slicker deal than I thought anybody could make with Aaron Jacob. If he keeps them critters a month you'll get thirty dollars a head, and they'll still be worth just as much as they are now to sell to somebody else. Course, if he buys 'em—"

"I got a mind to do some swapping," Adam said. "You know this country pretty well?"

"Nobody knows it better," Elias declared. "I come here while my ears was still wet and been here ever since, except for a trip to Abe Lincoln's war. Saw the first buildin' put up in this town. Saw the railroad come. I done right well here. Got me some property besides this lot. Might say I know this bailiwick like the back of my hand."

"I picked Basin City," Adam said, "because I heard the Basin was mighty good cattle country and almost all open range. That means a fellow can homestead a home place and register a brand and turn his cattle loose to run where they please between roundups. That right?"

Elias fingered his whiskers. "Well, yes and no. Ain't hardly that simple. A fellow can do like you said—and most likely lose his britches. If you don't mind takin' advice from a old coot that's been through the mill, I can maybe save you some bumps."

"I been thinking," Adam told him, "I might file on a quarter-section and then swap these bulls, all but four or five, for good young she-stuff. Keep my bulls on the home place and hold the heifers there until they are bred, then turn them on the open range until time to round up and brand the calf crop. How could a fellow lose his britches doing that?"

"Easy," Elias replied. "Like you heard, this is good graze, and ninety-nine acres out of a hundred belongs to God and the government. That means open range. But the only way you can throw a little herd onto it and get any increase is to keep riders with them every minute."

"Why?" Adam asked.

"Like this," Elias replied. "Seven big outfits have got control of the Basin. Each of 'em runs four or five thousand head and keeps a big crew steady. They don't want little outfits clutterin' things up and crowdin' the graze. Now supposin' you throw out a hundred head. The big spreads have to kill a critter every week or so to feed the crew. What's easier than to hunt up a critter wearin' your brand? They bury the hide and eat up the critter, and come roundup time you show up to help and maybe find only half your cows. Don't take much of that to discourage a fellow."

"Hell," Adam said.

"Sure is," Elias agreed. "But it's human nature. The big spreads got here first. Naturally the big fish eat up the little ones. They don't figure anything wrong about that. It's your fault for bein' little."

"Hold it!" shouted the one man who could stop this fight

Adam pulled his ear and frowned thoughtfully.

"Another thing," Elias went on. "You can't fence—only corrals. Only way you can keep fence standin' is be able to see every foot of it all the time, and that's hard to do at night."

"Look," Adam said. "One man could keep a herd of, say, a hundred and fifty bunched and guarded. Suppose I put out a herd like that and hired a rider to spell me. Then—"

"Range wars get started that way," Elias cut in. "Maybe the fellow ridin' night herd stops a bullet, and the next mornin' your critters is scattered to hell-and-gone over the Basin. Time you get some extra help and round 'em up a lot of 'em is already in stew kettles."

"A man can't buy this government land?" Adam asked.

"Nope, and if you could it wouldn't do you any good. Like I said, you couldn't fence. Only one fence has ever stayed put in this country and that's the one across the north end of Jacob's Kingdom."

"Tell me about Jacob's Kingdom," Adam said.

They had been standing by the wooden gate. Elias sat down with his back against it. "Set," he invited. "It's quite a yarn. You might as well hear it all—and straight."

Adam sat down.

"Old Josiah Jacob started it," Elias began. "He came here with one of the wagon trains that chased each other to California in the '49 gold stampede. But Josiah wasn't interested in gold."

ELIAS stuffed his jaw with tobacco and went on, "Josiah brought his wife and four sons and two daughters all the way from Pennsylvania. Took seven wagons to haul them and their goods. All four sons and one of the daughters was married. Besides the wagons, they had a sizeable herd of cattle and young horses. All the tools they brought were plows, harrows and such farmin' stuff, and Josiah was lookin' for a place to use 'em. He found what he was lookin' for 'bout ten miles south of here.

"You look that way you can see just the top of Poverty Ridge. It's a jumble of naked rocks and shale that runs along the

south edge of the Basin all the way to the Rockies. What Josiah found was a pocket of good, rich, level land with some big springs. In them days the forty-niner wagon trains made camp at the springs. Josiah took a ride into the pocket and decided it was what he wanted.

" 'Let fools kill themselves huntin' gold,' Josiah told his family. 'Here's twenty thousand acres of good soil and plenty of water. Rock bluffs fence it on three sides, and there's enough good pole timber along the creek to fence the north end. It belongs to them smart enough to see it and strong enough to hold it. That's us. Let's get to work.' "

"How do you know what he said?" Adam asked.

"I come here in '54," Elias replied. "Old Josiah was still alive and hearty. Remember I said he had a daughter that wasn't married. I sparked her some and come darn close to enterin' the Kingdom. Well, the Jacob tribe settled in the pocket. They broke and farmed what land they could handle and set out orchards and vineyards. They turned their cattle onto belly-deep grass on the rest of the pocket. They built a pole fence across the mouth of it, and as soon as the homestead law went into effect hereabouts they filed on a strip behind the fence. That made it easy to hold folks out of the rest until more Jacob kids got old enough to file on it. Now the tribe owns it all, lock stock and barrel."

"Must be a lot of them," Adam said.

"Towards two hundred, countin' kids," Elias said. "Got forty-odd houses on the strip of farm land along the west bluffs. Got their own schoolhouse and they hire good teachers from back East. They raise cattle, horses, sheep and hogs, besides the farm and orchard stuff. Old Josiah was right. They're richer than anybody ever got in the gold fields."

"I see why it's called Jacob's Kingdom," Adam said.

"No you don't—yet," Elias said. "It's like this. The Jacob tribe owns that pocket all together—like one of these religious outfits, only the Jacobs' religion is work. They work together and share alike. The oldest Jacob in direct line from Josiah is boss. That's Aaron now. Another thing, I told you Josiah brought along a son-in-law. His name was Cooper, but he took to callin' himself Jacob, because that was easier than always explainin'. That started somethin'. When a feller name of Jansen wanted to marry Ivy, Josiah's youngest gal, Josiah wouldn't allow it until Jansen had his name changed legal to Jacob. It's been like that ever since. So there ain't nothin' but Jacobs in the pocket. The teachers at the Jacob's school don't bother with nothin' but first names when they call the roll. That's how come folks started callin' it Jacob's Kingdom. Feller marries a Jacob filly he enters the Kingdom."

"Hm," Adam said. "And the Kingdom is one of the big outfits that you said run the Basin?"

"Nope. The Jacob tribe stays behind their fence—like the feller says, aloof. Proud and superior. Peaceful, long as they ain't crossed."

Adam glanced at the sinking sun. "I see," he said. "Time I went and got me some supper."

TWO DAYS passed. Adam had been busy gathering information about the Basin. He was making a morning inspection of his remaining bulls when Elias Edwards came along.

"Morning," Adam greeted. "Wonder if you'd mind keeping your eye on these animals today. I been talking to some of the big ranchers. Think I'll ride out today and see if I can do some dickering with Jacob."

"Glad to accommodate," Elias said. Then he grinned. "Figure to get a look at Queen Rachael?"

Adam felt his ears burning and hoped it didn't show. "I'm going to look at the heifers Jacob bragged about. Might do some swapping. How do I get to the Kingdom?"

"Just head south and keep on the main trail. You'll come to a gate with a sign that says to shut it after you. Fifth house you come to after the gate will be Aaron's. Time you get there probably only Rachael will be in the house. Her ma died six or seven years ago. That's how come she's queen of the Kingdom. Got no brothers or sisters. I noticed her eyein' you whenever you wasn't gawkin' at her the other day. You might turn out to be

another Jacob yet—in spite of Dave Avery."

"Don't bet on it," Adam said.

Adam found the white-painted gate shortly after ten o'clock. Elias had not entirely prepared Adam for what he saw. At intervals of several hundred yards, well-built, neat and roomy houses stood surrounded by cultivated fields, orchards, vineyards and large vegetable gardens. This vista continued southward farther than Adam could see.

It was now mid-May, and young corn was two inches tall in straight, clean rows. Blossoms still lingered on apple trees and lilac bushes, mingling their fragrance with the spring scent of new-turned earth. A speckled hen scratched for her brood of a dozen fluffy chicks along the fence row and scolded as Adam passed.

Approaching the gate before the fifth house, Adam hoped that Elias had been right about Rachael being there alone at this hour. Otherwise he might not even get to see her. He tied his horse to a rail beside the gate and followed a tulip-bordered path to the front porch. She answered his knock on the door.

Adam gaped. In pink gingham, with her abundant black hair twisted into a careless knot at the nape of her neck, flour on her rounded arms and her face flushed by the heat of a kitchen stove, Rachael was still the most beautiful girl Adam had ever seen.

Rachael spoke first. "Why, good morning, Mr. Crockett."

"Morning, Miss Jacob," Adam got out. "Is your father home?"

"He's out on the graze somewhere," she replied. "He will probably come home for dinner before you could find him. Won't you come in?" She stepped back, holding the door open.

Adam entered, saying, "I like the flowers you have along your walk."

The large living room was not elegant but it was clean, bright and inviting, furnished for comfort. Rachael closed the door.

"They are nice tulips," she said. "The original bulbs were brought from Pennsylvania."

"I like flowers," he said. "They're pretty." The observation was not profound, but Rachael looked as if she thought so.

The things they were doing and saying were not at all the things they wanted to do or say. Their eyes refused to meet directly, but neither could conceal the hunger in them.

"Tulips and rose bushes," Rachael said, "are all I can grow out front on account of the chickens running loose. But I have a nice flower garden behind the house, fenced in. Would you care to see it?"

"I sure would," replied the man who had come to look at heifers.

ADAM followed her out the back door and into a plot enclosed by a tall fence woven of willow withes. Morning glory and other vines had climbed nearly to its top. Young plants of many varieties grew in neat beds with narrow paths between. Only verbena and a few other early flowers were blooming.

"This is mighty nice," Adam declared.

"It will be beautiful from summer until frost," Rachael said. "I love to sit out here then."

"Must smell sweet of an evening," Adam said.

"Some day," she said, "I want to get some gold fish and have a pond right over there."

As she started to point Rachael's hand encountered Adam's, and suddenly their fingers were tightly entwined. Her dark eyes came up to meet his. She gave a little gasp as he drew her to him, but did not resist his warm embrace. Finally Rachael twisted her head to bury her face against his chest.

"Oh Adam, Adam!" She sobbed the name that had become so familiar in her dreams.

He buried his face in the clean fragrance of her hair, and they clung desperately to each other, both whispering words of endearment until his hand gently lifted her flushed face and his lips again found hers. Minutes passed before they drew apart shaken with emotion, their eyes full of wonder.

The shoulders of Adam's blue shirt were smudged with flour from Rachael's arms. She laughed shakily and brushed away the smudges. Suddenly both were embarrassed. His hands moved up to capture hers, and she backed away.

"Adam, "she cried, "we mustn't. I—I'm

promised. And I must go to the kitchen. I'd just put bread into the oven when you came. You better wait for father in the front room. I have to— Oh my! That must be father now."

The hoofs of a cantering horse were pounding the road beyond the house. Rachael ran towards the back door and Adam followed. He was seated on a hide-covered sofa in the big front room when Aaron Jacob entered.

Rachael appeared in the door leading from the kitchen. "Mr. Crockett just came, father," she said. "I told him you should be home in—"

"Saw him ride up," Aaron said, "from down at Lige's. Howdy, Crockett. Come to collect for the bulls?"

"I've come to see if maybe I could swap them for some young heifers."

"Won't hurt to try," Aaron said. "But set down. Rachael ought to have dinner before long. While she's getting it ready, you could give me an idea what sort of trade you have in mind."

They discussed a cattle trade until Rachael announced dinner. Adam couldn't remember afterward just what he ate. He tried to pay attention to what Aaron said and to keep from looking at Rachael too often or too long. He found no opportunity to speak many words to her, none he wanted so badly to say. It was unlikely that he would have reason to return to the house. He was in despair.

Rachael bought him his hat, as he and her father prepared to leave to look over the Jacob herd. She managed to let him see her drop a compactly folded note into the deep crown of the Stetson.

Preceding Aaron out the front door, Adam managed to transfer the note to the pocket of his shirt. It burned unread there in front of his heart while he and Aaron rode among the grazing herds. It was past four o'clock before Adam reached the Kingdom gate, townward bound. Only after he had closed the gate and left it a hundred yards behind did he rein his mount to a walk and read the note:

My darling:
I cannot remain promised to another man and I will not. I have never truly loved until now. You must know that. I will try to do what I must do before we meet again and I pray that will be soon.

Yours forever,

Rachael

Adam read the note three times before placing it back into the pocket over his heart.

IT WAS after breakfast the next morning when Adam next saw Elias Edwards. The old-timer was pushing hay down in the holding lot mangers when Adam arrived. Elias climbed out, and they sat on the edge of the water tank.

"Make a trade with Aaron?" Elias asked.

Adam nodded. "I get sixty short yearling heifers for the bulls. I'm going to take them in a month—after they're bred."

"Sounds like a good trade if you get to pick 'em."

"I do. Is there a likely quarter-section in the basin—good soil with water on it—still open to homestead?"

"Might be," Elias admitted. "You got it in mind to run a herd?"

"Yes, if I can work it out to suit me."

"I might help more if I knew what else you got in mind. A smile wiggled his whiskers. "You see Rachael yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Talk to her?"

"Yes."

"Figurin' you maybe want a quarter-section to do permanent things on—like raisin' a family?

Adam frowned and his face reddened. "I don't know as that concerns you," he said, but he grinned weakly as he said it. Anger at blunt, friendly Elias was almost impossible.

"Got a reason," Elias said. "Proposition in mind. Like to know several things before I make it—like do you figure on changin' your name to Jacob?"

Adam was silent for a moment. Then, "Just between you and me, I'm going to marry Rachael Jacob, but when I do her name will be Crocket."

"And you figure to build a home place and graze a herd in the basin?"

"I do."

"You know Rachael is promised to Dave Avery?"

"She's not going to be long."

"Got her word for it?"

Adam nodded.

"By cracky, you sure must've made hay out at the Kingdom."

Adam said nothing.

"You know who Dave Avery is?"

"No."

Elias chuckled. "And don't give a damn, either. Fellow, I'm beginnin' to cotton to you. You make me forget how old I am. One more thing. You got plenty *dinero?*"

"Besides my cattle and horse, I got about a hundred dollars right now."

"So," Elias said, "supposin' you file on this claim you want. How you goin' to build?"

"Sod," Adam said, "to begin with."

"How you goin' to hire help to guard your herd?"

"When I've finished trading," declared Adam confidently, "I'll have around two hundred head of young heifers. I should be able to borrow enough on them."

"I doubt that, but it doesn't matter," said Elias. "By thunder, you've changed my mind for me. Here I was convinced that the young fellows nowadays wasn't worth a tinker's damn. Then you pop up and announce you aim to grab the queen right out of Jacob's Kingdom and put her in a sodhouse—as Mrs. Crockett. On top of that you figure to run a herd, come hell or high water, right under the noses of the big spreads, of which Dave Avery's Triangle A is one. Mister, I was about ready to wander off like an old dog and find a sunny spot to die in, but you made me feel like the curly wolf I used to be. Life might get to be worth livin' again around here. Want to listen to my proposition?"

Adam smiled. "Go ahead."

"I got a section four miles west of town that I'm all proved up on," said Elias. "That's good level land with a spring-fed, six-acre pond on it. Be worth a lot of money some day. Now I ain't got kith nor kin in the world. So suppose you and me make a partnership. You file on a quarter right up against my section to make eight hundred acres of home place. We draw up the papers so in case either of us kicks the bucket the whole shebang belongs to the other one unless the one that dies leaves a wife, in which case she gets his share. Then we tear in and show these big spreads and Jacob's Kingdom that a couple of little guys mean business."

"Hell," Adam said, "that's loaded in my favor. You know I'm going to get married and—"

"Don't know nothing of the kind," Elias stopped him. "Maybe you heard there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip. Besides, young as I'm beginnin' to feel, I may up and marry me a pretty young gal 'most any day."

Adam sat frowning for a moment, then said, "I'd be a fool not to take you up."

"That's what I figured," Elias said. "Let's go up to Lawyer Cottle's office and draw up some papers."

TWO WEEKS passed, during which Adam filed on his quarter-section and the new partners were busy. Adam traded the rest of his bulls for heifers, delivery to be taken July first.

They hired some help and built a small soddy on Adam's quarter—that being required by the homestead law. They registered their C Bar E brand and made ready to take over their herd on the appointed date.

Rachael Jacob had not been in town, and Adam had heard nothing from her. One evening as they rode in from putting the finishing touches on the soddy, Elias asked, "Can you handle a gun? Notice you never wear one."

"I've got one," Adam replied, "and I can use it. I shoot better with my Winchester, though. Why?"

"Liable to run into some fireworks," Elias said. "I hear Dave Avery is on the warpath on account of Rachael Jacob give him the mitten. Dave is a husky devil. He outweighs you twenty pounds or more, and he's greased lightnin' with a short gun."

They rode in silence for a way. This was Adam's first knowledge that Rachael was no longer promised to Avery. His mind rejoiced over that before turning to the rest of what Elias had said. Since they had become partners Elias had told Adam that Dave Avery, one of the Basin's big seven ranchers, had been approved by Aaron and the elders of the

Kingdom to become Dave Jacob, husband of Rachael, and bring his considerable wealth to the coffers of the Kingdom. Avery had been arranging to sell his herds and range control and attend to other details in time for an early fall wedding.

Elias broke the silence. "I heard last night that Dave was in town yesterday and made his brag that you ain't going to be around here long. He's a touchy cuss, and tough and mean when he's r'iled. Might be just as well if you was to stay out of his way."

"Look, Elias," Adam said. "My dad told me a long time ago that the longer you run from trouble the more tired you'll be when it catches up to you. I won't hunt it, but I won't hide either."

The trouble came quickly. It was routine for the partners to eat supper at the restaurant, then walk across the street to the Buckhorn saloon to have a mug of beer before going to Elias' cabin to sleep. Adam had moved his things there and expected to begin living on his claim in a few days.

That evening when they entered the Buckhorn trouble was waiting. A big, ruddy-faced man in range garb turned from the bar and strode to confront Adam. His dark eyes were narrowed to slits.

"I'm Dave Avery," he snarled.

"Glad to know you," Adam said calmly.

"You won't be glad long," Avery retorted, "because I'm going to beat the living hell out of you right now. And I'm going to do it again every time I see you in this territory. If you get enough guts to belt on a gun like a man, I'll kill you on sight."

With the final word Avery launched a vicious blow at Adam's head. Adam dodged nimbly and the massive fist went over his shoulder.

"Hold it!" The sharp order came from Elias Edwards who had quickly placed his back to the wall beside the front door. It made the already quiet barroom more tense. Even Dave Avery froze. Everybody in Bluestem Basin except Adam knew that Elias' gun had for years been the most swift and deadly in the territory. Few were yet willing to gamble that the old-timer's eye had dimmed or his dexterity lessened.

"This here is goin' to be a fist fight," Elias went on, "so there ain't no reason for one feller to be wearin' a gun. You shuck down, Dave. After that, this fight ain't nobody else's business.

WITH a savage growl Dave Avery ripped off his belt and gun and threw them to one of his riders at the bar. Then, swinging piledriver fists, he rushed Adam Crockett. Adam sidestepped, spun and gained room in the center of the floor. For a couple of minutes the action was furious. Dave Avery was a savage fighter and much the heavier man. He launched two swings and punches to Adam's one, but more of Adam's landed.

Adam was more nimble, and his lean body was in perfect condition. Dave was fighting in black rage, while Adam remained cool as he avoided the murderous blows or knocked them aside and danced away from his foe's clutching hands and landed an occasional solid blow of his own. One had cut Dave's lip.

Then, snarling in anger, Dave bored in, utterly disregarding Adam's dextrous fists. He took a solid jab on the nose and crashed a swinging left that just missed Adam's jaw and struck high on the shoulder. The blow sent Adam staggering back to land hard in a sitting position. As he started to rise, Avery leaped forward and kicked viciously at Adam's face.

ADAM fell sidewise just in the nick of time and grabbed with both hands at the polished boot. He gripped Avery's ankle, and he threw his body as well as his arms into a quick and powerful twist. Dave toppled and crashed heavily to the floor. Adam came to his feet and stood waiting for Avery to rise. Avery tried, and his face went white with pain as his right knee buckled.

"That wasn't fair," yelled one of the Triangle A riders at the bar.

"Dave tried to kick Adam's head off while he was down," Elias Edwards said flatly. "Let 'em alone."

Avery remained crouched, sweating with the pain of his twisted knee.

"Look, Avery," Adam said. "I'm not going

to fight any man who can't stand on his feet. Any time you can, I'll fight you again, but I'm liable to cripple you if you try to foul me. And I won't draw against you with a sixgun. But if you want to shoot this out, you just say when, and we'll stand a hundred yards apart with rifles on our shoulders and shoot when somebody gives the word."

Avery didn't answer. Elias looked at Adam and said, "We came in here for a beer. Let's have it and go about our business."

The partners went to the bar, and Avery's four riders picked him up and helped him out of the place.

Twenty minutes later Adam and Elias approached the latter's little house a block off of the main street and found a woman waiting for them. She rose from where she had been sitting on the stoop, as they came up in the darkness. She was the widow Hale, dressmaker for the women of the basin.

"Why, howdy, Nancy," Elias said. "You lookin' for me?"

"Hardly," the chubby widow replied. "If this is Adam Crockett with you I got a letter for him."

"This is him," Elias said. "Adam, meet Nancy Hale."

She held out a white envelope and said, "Mr. Crockett, I was out to the Kingdom today fitting some new dresses for Rachael Jacob. She asked me to bring you this."

Adam took the letter and the widow stepped past and walked away down the street.

Inside the house, Adam tore open the envelope as Elias lighted the lamp. There was a neatly written message on the single page.

> Adam dear:
>
> I have told Dave Avery and my father that I am not going to marry Dave because I love you. Dave is very angry and Father is cross. Please watch out for Dave because he said horrible things. Father has said that I can let you call on me if you ask to. We are coming to Basin City on Saturday. I will be in the postoffice at two o'clock in the afternoon, so that you can ask me and I can invite you to come to dinner Sunday. I am sending this by Mrs. Hale. She has promised to be sure that you get it in time. You know I love you.
>
> Rachael

Elias had droppd into an old rocker and pulled off his boots while Adam read the letter twice over. Adam stood silent, a smile tugging at his lips.

Finally Elias said, "Well, we're partners, ain't we?"

"Not in this," Adam said. Then after a moment of silence he grinned. "Go ahead and read it."

Elias squinted attentively over the letter. "Sounds like some progress," he said as he returned it, "but you still got a problem, if you don't aim for your name to be Jacob."

"I'll handle it," Adam said gruffly.

Elias shrugged. "Reckon it's time we was in bed. Be a busy day tomorrow, if you aim to stay in town Saturday."

ADAM rode out early on the morning of the last Sunday in June to have dinner in the Kingdom and court Rachel. Before he left, Elias gave him some advice.

"Don't lose your temper with that outfit," the old man said. "If things don't go just to suit you, remember that Rachael is your ace in the hole. If I remember right, she's twenty-two this spring. Smart gal, too. You just let her sort of engineer things, and don't make the row any harder for her to hoe."

Adam nodded and rode away. Elias spent an uneasy day around town. He ate supper at the restaurant and went home soon after dark. He was still awake and fidgeting in his old rocker when Adam arrived just before midnight. Adam looked glum.

"We had a whale of a row," he answered Elias' inquiring look. "After dinner Rachael and I went out in the garden and she told me how she had talked her Dad and the others into agreeing that we could get married. Then she told me I'd have to change my name to Jacob and sell out everything and come into the Kingdom. Aaron and Lige and a couple of the others were waiting in the house. Soon as I agreed, she said, they would set the date for the wedding."

"What happened then?" Elias asked.

"I got mad," Adam replied. "I grabbed Rachael by the hand and took her into the house. I told that outfit that my name was Crockett and my wife's name was going to be Crockett. I told them that my Dad marched

with Sherman through Georgia and my uncle rode with Jeb Stuart. I told them that another uncle died at the Alamo and another Crockett is a congressman at Washington, and that Crockett was just as good a name as Jacob."

"Fair start," Elias said as Adam caught his breath. "You tell 'em anything else?"

"I told them I just wanted to marry Rachael—not her tribe or any share of their blasted Kingdom. I told them if I wanted a kingdom I was big enough to build it myself."

Elias sighed. "By golly! And I missed it! What happened then?"

"Aaron made Rachel go upstairs to her room. We didn't get a chance to say anything to each other. The rest of us argued. I don't remember everything, but they pointed out that I'd have an equal share in more than a million dollars cash besides the Kingdom. I told them to go to hell. Then they shut up and got mean. They took me out on the range and paint-marked my sixty heifers as I picked them out. Said they'll deliver them this Wednesday and that I'll be shot if I ever came near the Kingdom again. But I've got to see Rachael."

"I wouldn't fret too much," Elias said. "You forgot about that ace in the hole I mentioned. Maybe you still got it—in spite of goin' off half-cocked. Supposin' we get some sleep now while you cool down."

They had been asleep about four hours and dawn was near when they were awakened by a pounding on the front door. Elias opened up and Nancy Hale pushed inside, bringing Rachael Jacob with her.

"Looks like your ace in the hole has turned up," Elias said to Adam.

But Adam was not paying any attention. He and Rachael were locked in a tight embrace.

"What goes on, Nancy?" Elias asked.

"Rachael came to my house," the widow answered. "She wanted me to hide her and come after Crockett. I fetched her here instead. That's all I know."

"Break it up, you two," Elias said. "You got a lifetime for that. "What do you aim to do right now?"

"Get married," Adam said.

Then Rachael continued, "But we must hurry. I climbed out of my window and sneaked away, but father and the others won't be far behind. We must ride as fast as we can over to Red Rock."

"Elias," Adam asked, "will you saddle my horse while I get the rest of my clothes on?"

"Hold on," Elias said. "Remember that the farther you run from trouble the tireder you are when it catches up. Parson Dagett is right here, and you got to stand and face the music some place."

"But," Rachael protested, "Parson Dagett is beholden to my father. He won't marry us like—like this."

"The hell he won't," Elias said. "I got some influence with the parson, too. You two just wait right here."

"Look," Adam said, "I think Rachael ought to know I haven't yet got a decent house—"

"Now you argue," Elias cut him off. "Fellow, you ain't got the sense God gave a goose. You two stay here and wait. Nancy, you come along. I got some talkin' to do to you, and bein' a good church member you can maybe help with the parson."

Elias and the widow went out into the pale dawn together, leaving Adam and Rachael still clinging to each other.

"I think Elias is right, Adam," Rachel said. "Once we are married—" She had raised her face to his, and that ended conversation for some time.

IT WAS not quite an hour later when Parson Dagett officiated at a double wedding in Elias' cluttered little living room. The ceremony was about to begin before Adam and Rachael became aware that it was a foursome.

"Nancy and me," Elias explained, "has decided we both been livin' alone long enough. From now on she's goin' to do all her sewin' on my duds. Get about it, Parson."

The ceremony took five minutes. It was a far different wedding than Rachael had ever pictured for herself, but she decided it was the nicest one she'd ever attended.

At seven o'clock a score of riders—all named Jacob—came racing into town. They were armed, and their faces were set with grim determination, when they pulled their

sweating mounts up before Elias Edwards' humble home.

The door opened before any could dismount. Mr. and Mrs. Elias Edwards stepped out onto the stoop.

"Howdy, Aaron," Elias said.

"Where is Adam Crockett?" Aaron Jacobs snarled. "And where is my daughter? I warn you, Edwards—"

"Now Aaron," Elias said, "pull in your horns. You are somewhat too late. Rachael is now Mrs. Adam Crockett. Like lawyers say, the fact is accomplished."

Aaron took a threatening step toward Elias and then stopped as Adam and Rachael appeared in the doorway.

"Father," Rachael cried, "Adam and I are married. Please don't be mean about it."

Aaron Jacob ignored his daughter.

"Crockett," he said, "your wife is no longer a Jacob. We have now forgotten her. Your cattle will be delivered on Wednesday to Edwards' lot, and after that you will also be forgotten by us."

With a final bitter curse he wheeled his horse and rode away towards Main Street, followed by the other Jacob riders.

"We'll have some breakfast now," said Nancy Edwards, "and then figger out how we're going to live."

"Adam has a soddy," Rachael said. "That's where we're going to live."

She was shaken but not broken by her father's bitter renunciation. Her lot, for better or for worse, was cast with Adam Crockett from then on.

A short time later the four sat about the small table in the kitchen. As they ate they discussed the possibility of further trouble from Dave Avery and the other big spreads. When the meal was finished Nancy took over.

"You men," she said, "scoot off and rustle up a team and wagon and get it back here."

"What for?" Elias asked.

"To haul furniture out to Adam's soddy," Nancy replied. "Rachael and I will ransack this place and my place and get together what she needs. You and me, Elias, are going to live in my place for a while, where I won't have to put in a week of house cleaning first thing."

A WEEK later the C Bar E herd of 187 young heifers and five bulls were pushed out onto the free range. Adam and his bride were keeping house in the small, squat soddy with the bed behind a curtain across one end. He worried about having brought her to this from her place as queen of the Kingdom, but Rachael laughed at him.

"I never was so happy in my life," she assured him. "My great grandmother lived in a covered wagon her first summer in this country. I can do anything she did, don't you think?"

"Reckon you can," Adam replied, "but—"

"But nothing," she stopped him. "You said you would build your own kingdom and you will—and I'll help."

It was a rugged life as the weeks passed. The spring rains had brought up lush graze and the herd was doing well, but had to be guarded constantly. For a time the cattle would want to return to the herds from which Adam had obtained them in trade and they had to be kept together and drifted in a wide circle about the C Bar E headquarters to prevent ravaging by the big spreads for table meat. The arrangement was that Elias rode out at sundown and took over the night herding. Adam had early breakfast and relieved Elias at dawn.

Three weeks went by without trouble. The herd was becoming satisfied and more quiet. Adam and Elias began to hope that they were winning their gamble.

On the first Tuesday in August, dawn was near when Adam finished his breakfast and prepared to ride out. Rachael kissed him long and hard, and her admonition to be careful was more anxious than usual. She stood and watched him until horse and rider were lost in the gray darkness.

Adam knew that he would find Elias and the herd about three miles due west that morning. He put his horse across the rolling rangeland at a steady gallop. The east was streaked with gray when he topped a rise and saw the herd, a darker blot on a level bottom just ahead. Not many of the animals had yet risen from where they had lain during the night. Then his eyes made out Elias riding to meet him.

Elias was some fifty yards distant and had

just started to call out something, when the air was torn by wild yells and a volley of gunfire. The noise and the flashes from gun muzzles came from some distance to the north of the bedded herd. Then a score of mounted men were riding down, still firing as they came.

Bullets whistled about Adam, and he was almost unseated by the wild bound of his horse as it was hit on the hip by a half-spent revolver bullet. The first volley had dropped Elias' mount and sent the old-timer rolling. Then, just as Adam regained control of his horse, a bullet dealt his left thigh a numbing blow. That slug had come from a rifle.

Adam dropped the reins after jerking his horse to a halt. He slid from the saddle, dragging his own Winchester from its boot as he did so. The wounded leg crumpled, and he pitched headlong into the grass. His snorting horse danced away. Some twenty yards off he saw Elias crawling to shelter against his fallen mount. The herd was now on its feet, and the animals were milling wildly, alarmed by the shots and the wild shouting.

THEN the attackers were charging into the frightened herd, which began stampeding westward with a thunder of pounding hoofs. Elias was now firing over the still twitching body of his horse. A yelling rider raced past where Adam lay, snapped a shot which kicked dirt a yard from Adam's face and rode on.

Dawn had thinned the darkness until objects were visible at nearly a hundred yards. Adam lined his Winchester on the man who had shot at him and squeezed the trigger. The man rocked in his saddle for a moment, then fell and lay motionless. Adam started to lever another cartridge into his rifle. Then he felt a blow in his chest. Things swam about him for a moment, then there was only blackness.

Adam came to, choking. His head and shoulders were cradled in Elias' lap and Elias had poured a generous slug of whisky into his mouth.

"Easy, fellow," Elias said. "You're goin' to be all right. I've looked and you're hit high on the right. Take another swaller of this, and then lie still while I catch your horse. Mine's dead. We got to get you home to my place and have Doc Bailey fix you up."

Elias said nothing about his own left sleeve and hand being soaked with blood from a bullet hole through his upper arm.

The morning was half over when Dr. Jeff Bailey finished caring for his two patients. Adam had been put to bed and Elias, with his arm bandaged, sat in a rocker with his wife hovering.

"Crockett will sleep," the doctor said as he was leaving. "I gave him an opiate, and on top of the whisky Elias poured into him he'll be good for most of the day. And if Elias won't go to bed you see that he keeps quiet."

"Hell," Elias snapped. "Them damned coyotes probably scattered our herd to hell-and-gone to the west end of the Basin. I got to go find me some help to chase 'em down and get 'em back together."

"You're goin' to stay quiet and behave yourself," his wife snapped. "And where did you get the whisky you poured into Adam?"

Elias bristled. "You look here, Nancy. I grew up on red-eye. I want another snort right now and there's half a bottle left in my saddlebag. You go fetch it."

Nancy glared at him for a moment, then laid a hand on his head. "All right, you old fool," she said. "If you do what Doc Bailey said, I'll go get whoever you want to talk to about rounding up your herd." A few minutes later Nancy was on Main Street, when she saw Aaron Jacob come out of the hardware store.

"Aaron," Nancy called sharply, "I want to talk to you."

Aaron halted and waited for her to come up. These two had known each other for years.

"You listen to me," said Nancy, and Aaron listened for several minutes.

Nancy finished her tirade by asking, "Are you going to begin acting like the father of a mighty fine daughter, or keep on being a long-tailed rat?"

ELIAS EDWARDS was reclining in the big rocker when his wife entered, followed by Aaron Jacob.

"Howdy, Aaron," Elias said. "This is a surprise."

Aaron grunted. His eyes swept the front room and found only Elias. Rachael had gone back to the bedroom.

"What happened, Edwards?" Aaron asked.

Elias told of the attack and the stampeding of the C Bar E herd. "It was Dave Avery and his crew," he concluded.

"You sure of that?" Jacobs demanded.

"Hell, Aaron, they all had handkerchiefs over their faces and the light wasn't good. You can make plenty sure, though. Crockett shot Blackie Grimes out of his saddle. The others come back and got him and his horse and took 'em along as they chased off the herd. All you need is to find Blackie. If he ain't dead he's plenty bad shot."

Aaron nodded and turned to leave. Then he halted and turned back to say, "Is she—is Rachael—"

"Rachael's back there with her man," Nancy said. "I just looked in. She's leaned out of her chair and gone to sleep with her head by his on the pillow."

"Tell her not to worry," Aaron said gruffly and went out.

A couple of hours later forty-three men and grown boys, all named Jacob, rode up to the sprawling Triangle A ranch house. All were armed. All were silent and poised with grim purpose. For a quarter of a century the Jacob clan had kept apart in the Kingdom, secure in numbers, position and prosperity. But now the tribe was plainly on the warpath.

Aaron Jacob hailed the house. After a few moments the door opened, and Dave Avery stepped onto the porch.

"Avery," Aaron said in a cold, flat voice. "We are peaceful men. You know that."

"Sure I do, Aaron," Avery replied, his eyes flicking over the crew.

"We want Blackie Grimes," Aaron said.

"Blackie's not here," Avery said. "He—"

"You're a damn liar," Aaron said flatly. "I asked in town. Blackie was with your outfit in Basin City last night and rode away with you after midnight. You bring Blackie quick—or there won't be any Triangle A left in the Basin, and what's left of you will be roastin' in the ashes of these buildings. I'm through talking."

Avery licked his lips. "Aaron, this is Basin business. You never monkey in—"

"Bring Blackie Grimes," Aaron stopped him.

Avery stood silent for a moment, realizing that he had bet on the wrong horse. He had heard that Rachael had been disinherited by the Kingdom and laid his plans accordingly. "Blackie is dead," he blurted. "We buried him out back this mornin'. I don't see what—"

"Killed by a Winchester slug, was he?" said Aaron grimly. "Avery, get your men out here. All of them. We'll wait."

Twenty minutes later Avery and seventeen other men came and halted before the waiting Kingdomites.

"Now listen carefully," Aaron said. "We are taking a good look at every one of you. You've got till Saturday morning to gather

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up the C Bar E herd you chased off and bring it back to where you found it, and the tally better be right. Two of us will be waiting to take charge and watch it until Crockett and Edwards are fit. And while you gather the herd, you can spread this word to the other basin outfits. The C Bar E herd is going to be left alone—or else. You got everything straight?"

Avery nodded, and the Kingdomites wheeled and rode away.

It was mid-afternoon when Aaron Jacob stepped onto the porch of the house that was now the home of Mr. and Mrs. Elias Edwards. Nancy Edwards opened the door before he could knock.

"Hush," she said. "They're all asleep, and they need it."

"You just tell them," Aaron stopped her, "that when they're well, they'll find their herd about where they lost it." He turned and stalked away before Nancy could reply.

RACHAEL'S birthday came on a Sunday in late September. Elias and Nancy had come out to the soddy to help celebrate the occasion. Nobody else was expected. Rachael and Adam had seen nothing of any of the Jacobs since their wedding day.

Suddenly Elias looked up and pointed. "Look at what's comin'," he said.

A quarter of a mile away a cavalcade of horsemen, buckboards and wagons were approaching. Several score of horses and nine team-drawn vehicles were bringing the nearly two hundred inhabitants of the Kingdom to the Crockett soddy. Nearly half were children. Aaron Jacob, leading the van, stepped off his horse, and Rachael ran into his waiting arms.

"Howdy, folks," Aaron said to the others after he had been thoroughly kissed by his daughter. "We come over to have a birthday party. We figured we might not be expected, so we brought along some grub and some lumber to set up tables in case your house might be a little crowded."

Both Rachael and Nancy were suddenly in tears. Jacob women and children were piling out of the vehicles. Elias Edwards spoke first.

"Well," he said. "Unload and pitch in. Let's dig a cookin' pit."

After the noon feast, Rachael was buried in household linens and utensils and articles of clothing. The gifts were piled in two great heaps outdoors, since there was no room in the small soddy.

"I think," Aaron Jacob said, "you folks need more room. I'd say maybe a five-room house. We figured all of us but a couple of dozen would stay a few days and help build it. We got tents and stuff in the wagons to make shelter."

"Dad," Rachael cried, "we can't afford lumber and such until—"

Aaron stopped her. He was trying to frown grimly but his eyes wouldn't cooperate. "Rachael," he said, "you were a Jacob until you changed your name and left the Kingdom. But we don't keep other people's property. Lige, bring Rachael's share."

Lige Jacobs and two others went to a wagon and brought three heavy leather pokes which they placed on the table before Aaron.

"Here," Aaron said, "is twenty-two thousand in gold. That includes fair pay for your share of the land and cattle."

"Oh, Dad," sobbed Rachael, "thank you."

But Adam stood grim-faced. "No," he said. "I want to build my own kingdom."

"*Our* kingdom, Adam," Rachael corrected. "You endowed me with all your wordly goods, didn't you?"

"But—"

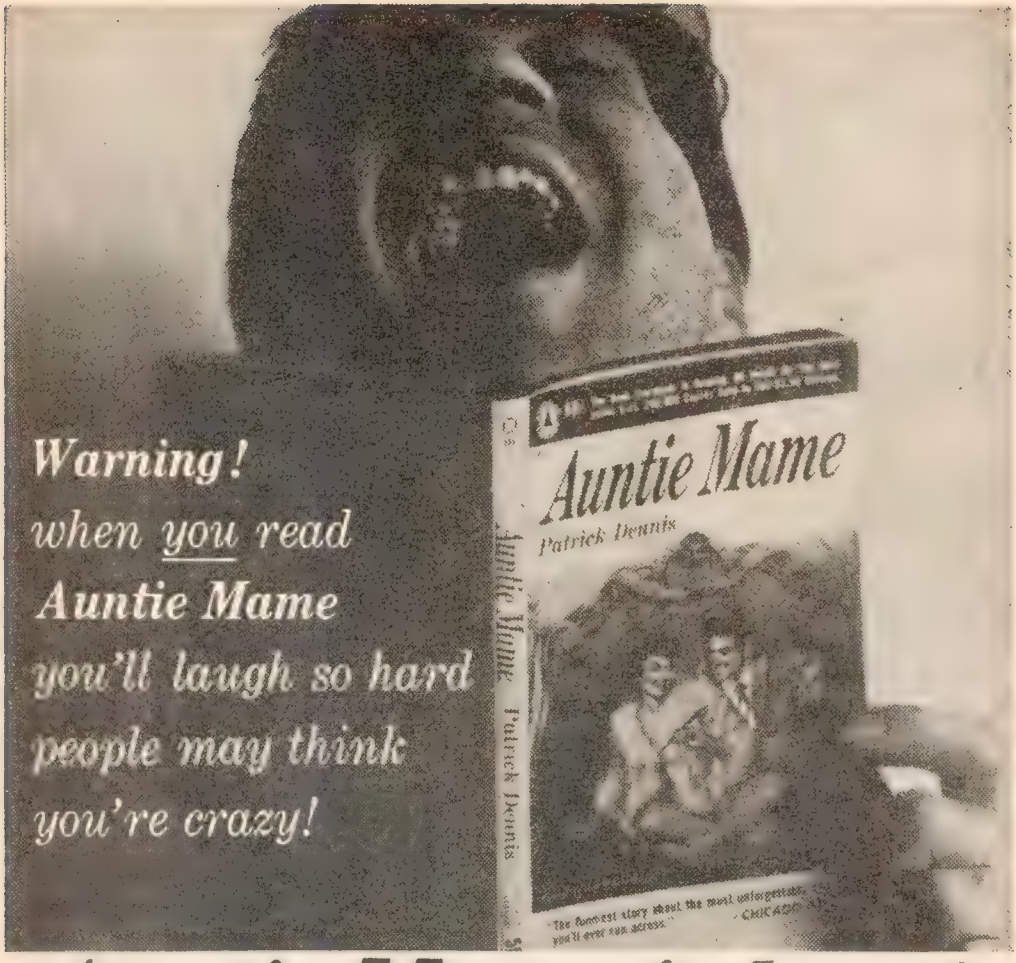
"And you'll agree that it's a poor rule that won't work both ways."

Adam stood struggling with her logic.

"Come, dear," Rachel coaxed, "let's plan our house. And while we have plenty of cheap help, let's build it big, with plenty of room for children. I'm sure everyone would like to know that the first one will be here in May."

All the Jacobs cheered. Aaron took a step toward his son-in-law and held out his hand. "Congratulations," he said, "on the first little Crockett."

Adam grinned at Aaron, and shook his hand. "I guess," he said, "we'd better build that house with an upstairs."



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HE BROKE her heart once when he ran away

By J. L. BOUMA

WHEN Art Driscoll entered the restaurant, Lynn Foster took a quick look to see that all her customers had been served, then hurried to join him at the end of the counter. "Lord, you've had me worried," she said in that shy, breathless way she had. "You haven't been to town in over two weeks. Is everything all right at the ranch?"

"Everything's fine, honey."

When he grinned at her, she felt a little catch in her heart. He had on a new black suit, and his hair was the color of honey.

"Been busy is all," he went on. "Got in a new bunch of horses the other day. I should have stayed to help Howie this week-end, but he said he could handle things. Anyway, I had to drive in and see a fellow about shipping some horses."

"Then you've decided against selling out?" she asked hopefully.

"No I haven't, honey."

"You don't like it here, do you?"

His grin vanished. "It's not that. I have nothing against Arizona. I just happen to think we can do better in Wyoming. Home country, after all." His grin returned swiftly. "Besides, if you love me, it shouldn't make any difference to you where we live."

"I do love you," she said softly, and told herself it was true. Art had made her come alive again, had helped her to forget Dan. Yet she was troubled at the thought of leaving her home town.

She forced it out of her mind. She was a dark-haired girl with a small, delicately-made face. She smiled and said crisply, "Our special tonight is Mrs. Gardner's famous corned beef and cabbage. Would you like some?"

"Can't, honey. Like I said, I have to see this fellow about shipping some horses. Suppose I call for you at the house around nine? All right?"

"All right," she said, and watched him leave and step into his buggy and drive up the dusky street.

A customer claimed her attention. She moved swiftly, her expression cheerful. And while she worked, she was thinking that she and Art would have a fine wedding. She had turned away from the past, turned her back on the bitter memory of Dan. So it was best to start a new life in Wyoming, she told herself.

She was 21, long past her childhood. After her father had died two years ago, she had sold the homestead and had moved to town to live with Martha, her married sister. She had been sure, at the time, that she and Dan would marry sooner or later, and after he had gone away she had taken a job at Mrs. Gardner's restaurant and had told her sister that she was moving to a rooming house. She and Martha got along fine, but after the bad time with Dan she had felt the sudden need to be independent.

Martha, a motherly woman, still thought she had to look out for her younger sister, and she had been against the move, especially since Art Driscoll had taken to calling on Lynn.

Would he break it again when he came back home?

"A rooming house is no place for a man to call on a young lady," she had said. "So as long as we have an extra room I'd rather you stay here. Anyway, you're making a little money now, and if you continue to live with us you can save most of it. And let me tell you, Lynn, that you'll need every cent after you're married. You've no idea of all the the things you'll have to buy. I've been out to Art's place, remember. He has no bedding to speak of, hardly any furniture, and not even any decent pots and pans."

"We don't mean to get married right away," Lynn said. "But when we do, Art'll be doing all right, and he'll be able to buy everything we need. He'll feel better knowing he's providing, and that's what I want."

"Rubbish," Martha said, and smiled to take the sting out of it. "I like Art, but that horse ranch of his isn't a money-maker at best."

"He's worked it alone for almost three years, and he's worked hard," Lynn protested to Martha.

"I know. Living from hand to mouth. Lynn, you know as well as I do that it takes time to build up a ranch to where it pays. So you're bound to get discouraged at times, and you'll feel a whole lot better when there's a little money in the bank that you two can fall back on."

Martha had been absolutely right, Lynn thought now.

In less than two years she had been able to save close to three hundred dollars. Besides, she still had her half of the two thousand they had gotten for the homestead.

And just last week, when she and Art had settled on the date of their marriage, she had told him about the money.

"Almost thirteen hundred dollars, Art. I know we don't need it now as much as I thought we would when we started going together, but it's still nice to have, isn't it?"

He had chuckled softly. "What are you going to do with it, honey?"

"Why, I thought we could use it to add a couple of rooms to the house. And to buy some furniture."

That was when he had turned sober, when he had told her that he meant to sell out and move to Wyoming.

HIS ABRUPT decision had shaken her, especially since he had been doing so well this past year. He had hired Howie, a taciturn little man whom she didn't like, but who was a great hand with horses. Art boarded horses, fattened them and broke them. He trained horses for the local stage company, and he had been making good money. Six months ago he had purchased a new buggy and a team of matching chestnuts, and he had presented Lynn with a dainty mare that could run like the wind.

Lynn was grateful, though she could have done without the mare. She had told Art as much.

"You know I appreciate the gift, Art. But she must have cost you a lot, and you could have used the money to build up the ranch."

"Nonsense," he had laughed. "My business is horses, remember? I got the mare for a song, honey. Besides, we can start worrying about the house later." He had kissed her. "After we're married."

Now it was close to that time, for they were to be married the following month. And it did not matter that he had suddenly made his mind up to move to Wyoming. Lynn was smiling dreamily, wondering what Wyoming was like, when a customer entered. For a second the smile remained carved on her small face, and her heart commemnced to pound wildly. The man who had entered was Dan—Dan Colley.

Then her smile vanished as he came up to the counter. She looked at him carefully, remembering so much.

"I just got in and heard you were working here," he said casually. "How are you, Lynn?"

She continued to stare at him. He had changed during the time he had been away. It wasn't only that he was two years older, but that his features had matured more than they should have. His face was lean, almost bony, and burned dark by the sun; his jaw was firm, his eyes faintly wary, faintly smiling.

"Why, I'm just fine," she answered coldly.

He pushed his hat back and a lock of curly black hair spilled across his forehead as he sat down. Lynn regarded him steadily and felt a coolness run through her. So it was all right. He could never again touch her emotionally.

"You've been gone quite some time," she told him. "Fiddle-footing around the country, I suppose."

"Something like that," he answered vaguely. "Thought I'd come back and see what I could do about finding a job." He rubbed his jaw. "Anything special on the fire tonight?"

So he was going to be casual and ignore the past, which was all right with Lynn. She handed him a menu, took his order and went to have it filled. She returned with the food without a word, and went around the counter to clear a table of empty dishes, thinking that he at least didn't have the appearance of a saddle tramp. His range clothes were neat and clean. She'd noticed that he was wearing a gun, but then he'd worn a gun when he was deputy marshal, and she supposed that by now it was a habit.

She chuckled dryly to herself, thinking the deputy's job had never amounted to much, for Capulin was a quiet cow town, and Dan's pay had amounted to little more than tobacco and eating money. So he had worked at odd jobs on the side—haying during season, a little carpentry work, and he had helped the homesteaders plow their fields and harvest their crops. Then in the evenings he'd taken charge of the town till midnight, and had slept in a back room of the jail.

SHE HAD met him the year her father became ill, when he had worked half days on their homestead on Apache Creek. She had liked his easy-going nature right away. Then later, after she had grown fond of him, they had often quarreled because he gave so little thought to his future. Only twice had he shown anger. The first time was when she had tried to talk him into taking out a homestead.

"Nothing doing," he had said grimly. "I'm not breaking my back plowing nearly worthless land."

"It's better than what you're doing now," she had retorted hotly.

"Maybe it is," he had answered. "But what makes you think I'm going to keep toting a star for pocket money, and plowing men's fields for the rest of my life? Good Lord, Lynn. I'm still young enough to bide my time and look around before I settle on something permanent."

But she had kept after him until he had turned in his star. And the "something permanent" had turned out to be a riding job on Murdoch's ranch. Three months later he had quit, and she had listened with despair while he told her the reason.

"Murdock has riders that've been with him fifteen years, and they're not making a dime more than the forty and found he paid me. And I don't mean to wake up fifteen years from now making the same amount. Why, at that rate we never would get married."

"If you work hard, Mr. Murdock is bound to make you foreman in time. And meanwhile you can take cattle instead of wages and start your own herd."

"Listen," he had answered patiently. "My chances of making foreman are practically nil unless I wait around until I'm a middle-aged man. As for taking cattle instead of wages, Murdock is against the practice for the simple reason that he doesn't want more competition than he's already got. I asked him, and I know."

Loving him, wanting desperately to help, she had offered him the money she had received from the sale of the homestead, saying he could use it to start a little business in town, and that she would help. He had refused emphatically and with finality.

"You hold on to your money, Lynn. I'll make it on my own sooner or later, don't worry about that."

"How? What do you expect to do?"

For the second time he had turned angry.

"Stop pushing me, Lynn. Stop grabbing at straws and acting like we have to make our fortune in the next couple of years. We have a lifetime ahead of us, and things will work out."

The next day he had told her he was going away, and she had been too stiff with hurt pride to argue.

"All right, go ahead," she had told him, "but until you learn to settle down you'll never amount to anything."

"Not around here, anyway," he had answered. "There's nothing here for me except you. And I love you too much to expect you

to live the drab life we'd have here."

"Maybe it wouldn't seem drab to me."

He had looked at her strangely. "But you're not the only one involved, Lynn," he had answered gently. Then he had kissed her and walked away.

He hadn't written. And as the weeks passed without a word from him, she'd become certain that he would never return. Then Art had filled the bitter void, and little by little she had forgotten Dan.

Now he was back and only aware of her casually, as though nothing had ever happened between them. Well, that was all right with her, she thought again. She could be as casual as he. There was, after all, no point in stirring the ashes of a dead fire.

She came up as he rose, put money on the counter and reached for his tobacco. He rolled a smoke, regarded her with a bleak expression. "I hear you're getting married," he murmured.

"In June."

He lit the cigarette and squinted at her through the smoke. "Be sure, Lynn—this time."

She stared at him coldly, angrily. "I've never been more sure in my life! I—I wish you'd go away!"

"Okay," he said, "but I'll likely be back for more of Mrs. Gardner's good cooking." He nodded shortly and went out.

Her lips tight together, she watched him angle across to the saloon and join a man who lounged in the slab of light that fell through the broad window. She wondered absently what he had meant, what it was he had been trying to tell her. Then she picked up his dishes and turned angrily to the kitchen.

MARTHA had heard that Dan was back. "George was at the saloon when Dan and this other fellow came in. Dan asked about you and went straight to the café. Did he have much to say?"

"Only that he was looking for work."

"Well, I'd stay away from him if I were you, because he's the kind that will always be looking for work."

Lynn said angrily, "What did you think I was going to do? Set my cap for him when I'm about to marry Art?"

Martha smiled sadly. "Of course not, honey. But first loves are hard to forget."

"Well, I forgot mine two years ago," Lynn said and went to her room to dress for the dance.

Art, when he called for her, also mentioned that Dan had returned. "Did he tell you what he's been doing?"

"How do you know I even saw him?"

"I was told he went to the restaurant," Art said. And then, "I wonder what brought him back?"

"He needs a job."

Art frowned. "He won't find one around here, not this time of year. He should know that, too."

"What does it matter?"

He smiled, put his arms around her. "When I heard he was back, I thought it was because of you, and I guess I'm a little jealous."

"There's no need to be," she said, and lifted her face for his kiss. Then she drew back. "If—he comes to the hall and asks me for a dance, you won't mind, will you?"

He laughed softly. "I won't fight him, if that's what you mean."

"Now I feel better," Lynn murmured. "Shall we go, darling?"

Despite the hope that Dan wouldn't come to the dance, she felt a tiny edge of exasperation when he didn't show up. She wondered if deep-down she wanted to make him jealous, and was angry at herself for having the thought. It was ridiculous because she was not the kind of girl that toyed with a man's heart. And yet she could not hide from herself the fact that she was faintly disappointed at Dan's absence—

An hour before the dance was due to end, Art said, "Do you mind if we leave, honey? We can go for a short drive before I take you home. Then I have to get back to the ranch."

"Oh, Art. I thought we'd go to church in the morning, and have a picnic in the afternoon."

"I'm sorry."

"Why do you have to go back? You said Howie could handle the work for two days." He bit his lip, and she thought he looked nervous and upset. "I didn't want to tell you, but we had a little trouble," he said softly.

"You mean you and Howie?"

He shook his head, glanced quickly around the crowded room. "I'd rather not talk here. Wait downstairs while I get the buggy. I'll tell you about it later."

The town was behind them when he finally spoke his thoughts.

"We lost a few horses lately, honey. I'm not saying they were rustled, because they might have wandered away. As you know, the country up around my place is pretty rough, and it's possible that those horses are holed up in one of the little canyons north of the house."

"We're paying them $40 a day, aren't we?"

"Then why didn't you mention it in the hall?" Lynn asked. "Maybe one of the men up there spotted the horses."

"Maybe. But it's still possible that the horses were rustled, and that whoever's responsible was at the dance. That's why I didn't say anything. You know how folks get when there's talk of rustling. Even neighbors get so they distrust each other."

"That's true," Lynn said slowly. "Still, there wasn't a man up there that I haven't known most of my life, and I'd hate to think—"

"Well, maybe there's nothing to it," Art said, and turned the team. "But I'd still better get back tonight. Howie's alone up there, and I'd feel badly if he ran into trouble. Rustlers can't afford to fool around, honey. If Howie happens to meet up with 'em, they'll shoot him without giving it a second thought."

Lynn shivered, knowing it was true. When rustlers and ranchers met it was open warfare. She remembered that not many years ago three rustlers had been caught and hanged without ceremony.

When they reached her brother-in-law's house, Art gave her a quick kiss, murmured good night and drove away at a fast pace. Lynn went immediately to bed, but she could not sleep for the thoughts that tumbled through her mind. One concerned Art, and she hoped desperately that the horses had only wandered away. The other thought involved Dan, and it was not one she wanted to face. Yet it troubled her until the moment she fell asleep.

The following morning, she decided against going to church. Worried and restless, she dressed in her riding skirt and went out to the small corral on the back lot to saddle her mare. After telling Martha that she was going for a ride, she headed away from town and rode hard for a mile through the sunny morning. Before her lay a tangle of hills and canyons and small, natural valleys. Deep within them, in the center of a small basin, was Art's ranch. By road, it was a good twenty miles from town, but Lynn shortened that distance by following trails through the rough country.

The sun was well up by the time she entered the basin and saw the ranch buildings. She knew before she reached the small, unpainted house that both Art and Howie were somewhere on the range; and she stopped and rested the mare for a half hour, feeling calmer after the ride. She looked through the two rooms of the house, the lean-to kitchen, feeling at home. Two bunks in the back room with rumpled blankets, no sheets. Odds and ends of clothing hung from nails. The house was dirty. Unwashed tin plates and cups filled a bucket beside the stove. Lynn made a face, thinking Art and Howie should wash their dishes even though they worked long hours.

Deciding that she would feel more at home

if the place was clean, she went to work. She swept the floors, made the bunks, drew water from the well and scoured the stove. Then she washed the dishes and stacked them on the shelf. By the time she came outside it was noon, and she wondered where Art was working. His horses were pretty well scattered, she knew, for it was only in the small valleys that the grass was plentiful.

She untied the mare, swung into the saddle and rode away from the house at a trot, thinking if she circled north she might meet him. He had said last night that the missing horses might have wandered in that direction.

A GOOD hour later she broke out of a stand of scrub pine and looked down on a long, narrow valley, where forty or more horses grazed on the tawny grass. At first, she saw no sign of riders, and she was about to turn back and pick up the county road when she noted two horsemen in the distance.

Certain they were Art and Howie, she rode forward, but she'd gone less than a hundred feet when she stopped. One of the riders had lassoed a horse; the other swung from the saddle and followed the rope down, examined the horse closely and turned back after freeing the animal. Lynn gasped, her gaze sharp. There was no doubt about it—the man was Dan Colley.

This was Art's domain, his house lay somewhere behind her. Dan did not belong here. He had no right to throw a loop on another man's horse. The shocking thought that had been with her since Art had spoken of rustlers, the thought she had been unable to face last night, struck again. Was Dan involved with the rustling?

Now she knew. Now she was certain. Men had been hung for what he was doing at this moment. The thought sickened her. She knew she should find Art and warn him, or she should notify the law. Yet she hesitated, aware of the consequences. If Art came while Dan and his partner were here, there would be shooting, and someone was bound to get killed. And if she notified the law, Dan would end up in prison.

She drew back in the trees as Dan climbed in the saddle. The two men turned and trotted toward the sloping side of the small valley, beyond which lay the county road. Lynn took a shaky breath. She must stop this, she thought; but she wanted no one to be hurt. She turned her horse and rode up the pine-clad slope, knowing that with luck she could intercept Dan and his partner before they reached town.

They became aware of her long before town was in sight. Dan turned to meet her, while his partner waited. Lynn came up at a hard run, and the mare pranced uneasily as she jerked to a stop, not used to this harsh treatment.

Her face pale, her lips trembling, Lynn glared at Dan. "I saw you." Her voice shook. "I saw you at Art's horses, and I'm warning you right now to leave."

Dan said in a flat voice, "So you saw us. What about it?"

Anger welled in Lynn. "Art told me last night that he had some horses stolen, and I kept hoping you weren't to blame." She was close to tears. "Now I know it was you. You and your partner were checking on the horses you plan to steal tonight, because no man would rope a horse that doesn't belong to him unless he has rustling in mind."

Dan's eyes hardened. "Did you see Art? Have you told him about this?"

"No! But I will unless you leave town by morning. I mean that. I'll not only tell Art, but I'll notify the marshal."

Dan sighed. "Looks like you got us, so it's a deal. Keep quiet about this and we'll leave town tonight."

Her lips twisted, but whether with contempt or because she was holding back tears, she didn't know. "What about the horses you've already stolen? Where are they?"

He smiled thinly. "In a canyon above that valley. Art'll find 'em without any trouble."

He gave her a long, calculating look and rode away. Lynn waited until he and his partner were well out of sight before she followed. She felt as though she had been torn apart and would never be whole again.

SHE MADE certain they had left town. After evening church services, she walked to the hotel, asked for Dan Colley and

was told he had checked out that afternoon.

The following morning she told Mrs. Gardner that she was taking the day off, and rode out of town. She wanted Art, needing his closeness, his comfort. She headed north, knowing he would be out on the range by this time, hoping she would find him in the vicinity of the narrow valley. If he wasn't there, she would spend the day looking for him.

When she came in sight of the valley, she saw no sign of the horses that had been there the previous day. Art and Howie had likely moved them yesterday afternoon, she thought. Then, less than a quarter of a mile away, on a little ridge, there was movement. Three horsemen appeared and stopped, and their gaze swept the valley. She knew instantly that one of them was Dan Colley, and that now there were three in his gang, instead of two.

Outraged, she spun her mare and raced back into the protection of the trees. Now she would warn Art, for Dan deserved to be punished, she thought bitterly. But where could she look for Art? Where could she find him? She rode instinctively toward the ranch buildings. It seemed pointless to scout the entire range.

When she topped the basin's south slope, she found that luck was with her, for she saw Howie's small figure cross the yard to the house. He caught sight of her, stopped, and hurried on. Then as she came up at a gallop, Art appeared in the doorway. Still outraged at Dan's lie, unable to stop herself, she swung down and stumbled into Art's waiting arms. His hands fondled her shoulders. "Hey, what is this?" he asked.

She told him quickly, breathlessly, and felt his arms stiffen. When she looked up and she saw that his face had grown hard and dangerous.

"Why didn't you tell me about this yesterday?" he demanded harshly.

"I—couldn't, Art. I promised."

As she spoke she became aware that Howie was standing in the doorway. And then Howie said, his voice toneless, "Come in here, Art."

"Don't get excited," Art said, but he turned and followed Howie inside. Then he swung back. "Wait out here, will you honey?"

She frowned, scanning the slopes northward, hearing the low angry voices in the house behind her, and was puzzled. The voices ceased. Then Art came out, a thin, apologetic smile on his face. "Look, honey. Go home, will you? And don't mention what happened."

"Art, what're you going to do?"

"We're going to track those boys, see if we can find what they did with the horses."

She stared at him. "You mean the horses that were in that valley yesterday? You mean they took them?"

"That's right. Took them and drove them somewhere last night."

"But if they did that, why would they be back today?"

"I don't know," he answered impatiently. "Just don't fret about it. We'll take care of things. You go home."

"Promise me there won't be any shooting. Promise me, Art!"

"If we handle this right there won't be," he said curtly, and took her elbow and led her to the mare. "Now get going."

She was confused and bewildered. As she swung onto the mare's back, Howie hurried out to the corral carrying a set of saddle-bags. Then Art slapped the mare's rump and turned back to the house. Lynn trotted away, her head turned to watch.

She was out of sight of the house when she heard the shots. Terror surged through her as she raced back. What had happened? Had Dan and his men been foolish enough to show themselves this close to the ranch?

ONE OF the three horsemen who turned out of the yard to meet her was Dan Colley. He put his mount broadside to the mare and grabbed the reins as Lynn tried to pass. His face was pale beneath the tan, and his jaw was set. "Easy, Lynn. This is as far as you go."

She felt as if something punched her in the stomach. "What—happened?"

He said gently, "Lynn, I have to confess something. For over a year now, I've been working as a special investigator for the Desert Stage Lines, south of here. We had a number of horses stolen lately—"

She stared at him, wide-eyed. "Art?"

"Art didn't steal them, no. But the horses were driven here, and kept here until they could be moved farther north. It's been going on a long time, Lynn. Our horses weren't the only ones involved, either. An organized gang of rustlers have been running stolen stock across the border, after fattening them up here. They used Art's ranch as a way station. It's been going on over a year."

In a small, hurt voice Lynn said, "A year ago he hired Howie. That's when he suddenly started to make money."

"He didn't hire Howie. The gang planted him here."

She gripped his arm. "Where's Art?"

"He and Howie tried to make a run for it," Dan answered. "That was the shooting you heard. Neither of them got away."

She felt the need to cry, but there were no tears in her. "I suppose he'd made enough money, and that's why he wanted to move to Wyoming. You tried to tell me about him yesterday, didn't you? When you told me to be sure—this time."

"That's right."

"Who are those other men with you?"

"One's my partner. The other's Sheriff Breen. We sent him a telegram yesterday, and he rode in early this morning. He's the man who makes the arrests."

"Poor Art," she said. "I'm sorry it had to happen this way."

"Maybe it's better," he said slowly, "than having a man walk out on you."

She shook her head. "You didn't exactly walk out on me, Dan. I know that now. I was pretty selfish, thinking only of myself. But I remember what you said about leading a drab life, and I said I didn't care, and then you said I wasn't the only one involved. You were speaking for yourself."

"I've got a good job, Lynn, a job I like. For you it would mean moving to a town even smaller than this one. I'd be away a lot of the time, and you'd likely spend days worrying about me. With all that to face, would you marry me now?"

"Yes," she said. "Because now I know I'm ready. Two years ago I wasn't."

Dan smiled slowly. "I'm a lucky man. There was only one thing here for me, and in the end I got it."

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Aoudads are exotic wild game animals with which some arid areas of New Mexico and other Western states have been stocked in recent years. Are they Chinese deer, Barbary sheep or Asian elk?

2. Which of these words most nearly describes the vocal sounds made by a porcupine: growl, yelp, whimper, roar, scream, snort?

3. What state noted for cactus, copper, cattle and a big canyon was admitted to the Union on February 14, 1912?

4. Does the rope halter called a *jáquima* or hackamore usually have one rein, two reins or no reins?

5. It is no military secret that the northern base of the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet is at Bremerton on Puget Sound—what state?

6. Taos, N.M., frontier rendezvous of the Mountain Men, site of an Indian pueblo and of Kit Carson's grave, often gets mispronounced—and no wonder. Want to try it?

7. Ft. Bridger, Wyo. was a frontier trading post established by Jim Bridger, who was principally famous as which: cattleman, U.S. marshall, outlaw, sheriff, scout, or freighter?

8. With modern ammunition, would the old West have been as gun-smoky as it was? Why?

9. What was the last name of the pioneer Mormon leader for whom Brigham City, Utah is named?

10. Many slang terms used by cowboys for a dumb, stubborn or otherwise no-account horse include the word "head", as "knot-head." Give two more.

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 113. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

a true story

By B. Katzin

White Medicine Man

CALIFORNIA has produced many tycoons in her history, but one of the first, the biggest and the richest was John Marsh, who made his fortune in the early 1800's. His desire for wealth came fairly late in his life, but once the ambition struck him, it drove him relentlessly.

He was born in Massachusetts in 1799, and after he graduated from Harvard, he decided to become a doctor. His deeply religious family wanted him to become a minister, and when he refused they cut off the money he needed for his medical studies.

John then went West. His first job was as a tutor in Fort St. Anthony, Minn. He saved his salary, intending to go back to Harvard some day and get his degree as a doctor. Meantime, he studied with the local physician.

He had almost enough to go to medical school, when he was offered a job as Sub-Agent for Indian Affairs at Prairie du Chien. He was hesitant to accept it, reluctant to postpone his studies any longer.

While he was making up his mind, fate took a hand in his affairs. He met a lovely girl, half-Indian and half-French, named Marguerite Decouteaux, and fell in love with her at first sight. When she told him she returned his love,

he decided to take the job and marry her. He knew it would be impossible for him ever to bring his bride back East, where her mixed blood would have made her a social outcast. He put his hopes for a medical career behind him.

With his wife's help, he learned the Sioux language and became very popular with the Indian tribe. He was extremely happy in his new life, especially after the birth of his son.

His happiness lasted for seven years. Then Marguerite died, giving birth to their second child. Soon after, he lost his job. Bitter and restless, he left his small son with friends and headed further west.

When he arrived in Los Angeles, the town was in the grip of a smallpox epidemic. There wasn't a doctor in the whole state of California. John Marsh convinced them that a doctor had arrived by showing them his college diploma, written in Latin, which no one in those parts could read.

Degree or no degree, John Marsh was a capable physician for those days. He helped check the smallpox epidemic, and soon was in constant demand. He dosed upset stomachs, set bones, dressed gunshot wounds and even delivered babies.

In this roundabout way, John had achieved his ambition to become a doctor, but now he wasn't satisfied. He decided that only money made life worth living, and the way to get it in California was to be a rancher.

With $500 he scraped together he headed north and bought a piece of land in San Joaquin Valley. It was fine, rich land, worth more than he paid for it. Its drawback to other purchasers was a tribe of unfriendly Indians who lived on it. But they were no obstacle to John; they were the foundation of his fortune.

He knew the Indians were suffering from malaria. As soon as he had pitched his tent, he went to see the Indian chief.

Without any fear or hesitation, John spoke to him. "I am your new neighbor," he said, "and I can make your people well."

The chief conferred with his braves and decided to let John Marsh try his skill, since their own medicine men could do nothing. John dosed them with quinine, and the results seemed miraculous to the Indians. They showed their gratitude by building him a house and planting his fields and orchards.

At this point John Marsh set about stocking his ranch, which he named Ranchos Los Meganos. As more patients flocked to him, he demanded payments in cattle.

His fees to white patients were extremely high. He charged 25 head for a dose of quinine or salts or for a blood-letting, 50 head for delivering a baby and 100 for an amputation. When he had to travel any distance to see a sufferer, his fee might run to four or five hundred head of cattle.

In 1841, he had enough cattle to satisfy him, and he gave up doctoring. But he still couldn't resist an opportunity to get richer.

Marsh was home at his ranch when a copy of *The California Star* was delivered, announcing that gold had been discovered in the Sierras. Marsh was one of the first on the scene. There he made his strike, and soon afterward he was on his way home with his saddle-bags bulging with gold. He used part of it to improve his ranch, and he buried the rest. At last he had all the wealth he could use, but he had become a bitter and lonely man.

Life, however, had one more prize for him. One evening a party of travelers stopped at his ranch, among them a Massachusetts school teacher named Abby Smith Tuck. The group had heard of the unfriendly, eccentric man and were apprehensive about the welcome they would get from him.

But as soon as he had seen Abby, Marsh greeted them all warmly, and served them a delicious dinner and urged them to stay on at the ranch. Abby and he found much to talk about, and two weeks later they were married.

John Marsh was happy once again. He and Abby shared a life of comfort and ease, and his joy was complete when she had a baby girl. But four years afterward, Abby died, and John became more embittered than ever.

One September day he went to San Francisco on business, wearing a gold watch and carrying $400 in cash. His ranch crew watched him gallop down the road, and they never saw him alive again.

The next morning they found his body, bruised and stabbed, stripped of his valuables, lying deserted in the road.

STAMPEDE!

THERE were two women on the trail drive . . . one who drove cattle like a man and another who drove men like cattle

THE TRAIL HERD had pushed well north of the Nueces when the two riders caught up with it. The herders were making night camp.

"Saul Holly?" A puncher said in answer to a question by the pair. "That's him over there by the wagons with the two women."

The younger rider laughed and cuffed back his hat. He was a sandy-haired, cocky boy of 18 who seethed with a core of highly nervous energy. "Two women on a cattle drive? Russ, boy, we stumbled on the right diggings!"

His companion, a big, smoky-eyed man in the mid-twenties, regarded the kid without anger, as though this were an old story. "We came looking for work, Cort, not trouble." His voice was quiet. "Let's keep it in mind, huh?"

The kid shrugged impatiently, and they rode over to the wagons where Saul Holly heard them out. Old Holly was not a big man. He stood five feet seven, with a stocky

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oak-strong body, his seamed face weather-darkened to a mahogany grain, his thin, unkempt, white hair like a misty nimbus about his bare head. His worn range clothes were more disreputable than his men's. Sixty-one now, he had pioneered in the great post-Civil War cattle drives to Abilene, Ellsworth, Wichita, and now to Dodge, the last great mecca for the Texas trail drivers. Saul Holly had become a living legend on the Chisholm, and Russ knew it, and stated his request with respect and brevity.

Holly nodded, eying the two newcomers with humorous, tolerant eyes as though he liked what he saw. "Riding the chuck-line, eh? Sure, I can use you boys. I'm undermanned this drive."

"Thank you kindly, sir," Russ said.

"And who might you be, young fella?"

"Russ Kindred, sir, of Texas. This here is Cort Davies, likewise."

Holly gave each a horny handclasp, and gestured to the two women. "My wife, Andrea, gentlemen, and my daughter, Joan." His voice took on a strong note of pride.

Russ Kindred had heard that old Holly took his women folk along on trail drives, but had supposed this to be just another of the legendary tales that had grown up around the little giant. Looking at the wife, Russ' puzzlement mounted. Andrea Holly was all of thirty-five years younger than her husband, and she was one of those rare women who was really beautiful. Even her men's clothes, as rough as any trail hand's, could not hide her grace. Dying sunlight brought out highlights in the rich red-gold hair framing the faintly oriental sculpture of her slim face, held in the dutiful placidity of a faithful wife. But the sultry langour of her dark eyes and the pouting coral of her full underlip seemed to hold an invitation. Russ was suddenly angry at himself; it was not usually his way to pass judgment on short order.

Young Cort Davies was staring hard at her and Kindred had to jolt him out of it with a hard elbow in the ribs. The old story again with Cort, he thought wearily—an attractive girl.

"Joan," the old man was saying to his daughter, "take these fellows over to the cook and tell him to fix them up. We ate already, boys," he added by explanation.

The daughter nodded and led the way to the chuck-wagon. She was about 19, as tall as her father, and her long stride was businesslike and masculine. Except for the wealth of tangled, tawny hair tied carelessly at the back of her neck with a piece of limp ribbon, her trail's hand clothes gave her much the appearance of a tall boy.

The bald, wiry little man in a greasy apron straightened from pouring water into the dish-piled wreck pan. "Hi there, sis. Something?"

"Saul just hired these two, Joe. Feed them, will you?" Her voice was level and clipped, like a man's—yet with low-voiced modulation that Russ found oddly pleasing. She had turned back to rejoin her father when the irrepressible Cort swept off his hat and made her a bow of mocking gallantry.

"Ma'am, fo'give us ignorant hogs, but it ain't often we see one lovely lady in a cow-camp, let alone two! Ma'am, I'm befuddled. Your mammy must have married when she was five years old."

"Not that it's any of your business," Joan Holly said coldly, "but my father's first wife—my mother—died when I was born. Saul married Andrea seven years ago. Now—any more questions? Stupid or otherwise?"

Cort lifted his hands in mock dismay. "Don't shoot, ma'am! I surrender!"

Joan set her fisted hands on her hips. "Listen, you owl-eyed knucklehead," she said levelly, "keep your place and you'll get along. Otherwise—" She snapped her fingers and walked away.

"Well," Russ said dryly, "you been taken down?"

"Plenty, partner," grinned Cort Davies.

"You don't want to run afoul of that gal," cackled old Joe, the cook. "She'll skin the hide of you faster'n I could pop a fly off a buffler's horn with a bullwhip. Say, you boys hungry or not?"

A WEEK of sun-seared prairie rolled behind the northward-trekking drovers, with Russ and Cort swallowing the dust of the drag. Finally they paused on the south bank of the Brazos, a broad gulf of

yellow-churning waters. A bad crossing at any time for Texas drovers, and the water was high this season. But old Saul Holly had crossed at floodtide on other occasions. Sitting his shad-colored pony on the muddy shore, Holly presented a figure of tremendous vitality and knowing confidence that held everyone calm and ready to follow his lead.

"Push 'em hard the whole way," Holly roared, "and I'll see you at camp on the other side." There were a few scattered shouts of approval as Holly slapped his horse's rump with his coiled lariat, plunging the beast into the roiling waters. The lead steer, caught up by this example, followed. The first animals and riders splashed into the whirling backwater, then dropped into the swift current of the deep central channel and began doggedly swimming. Tee Jones and Ace Leadbetter dropped back from point positions, turning back bunch quitters. The herd put the south bank behind and forged for the far shore. They floundered up the smooth sand bar of the north bank and surged to high ground.

The wagons followed, old Joe driving the chuck wagon, cursing and pushing the team hard. Behind him, Joan Holly drove a second wagon piled high with the warbags of the crew. Russ Kindred had hung close to her on his horse with no real expectation of trouble, for he'd long since seen Joan to be nearly as capable as a man at every trail job from steer-cutting to cooking. Cort would be up ahead, Russ supposed, near Andrea Holly. Russ shook his head, gloomily. No good could come of it.

Joan's wagon had just pulled into a shallow current. Suddenly Russ saw the rear wheel on his off-side beginning to lower—then the whole stern of the wagon canted abruptly into a steep drop-off which the front wheels had missed.

Russ reined his dun in close, shaking out the coils of his rope. He twirled out a huge loop, got it over the hub of the rear wheel on his side, the one still on steady ground, then over the whole tail of the wagon box. Joan was shouting at the harnessed animals, putting them into the full effort of righting the wagon, which was beginning to tilt awkwardly as the lip of the drop-off crumbled and dropped the rear wheel deeper. With the added impetus of the swirling current, the wagon would be thrown over on its side in a moment.

Russ spurred his dun through the shallow water to take up the slack in his lariat. It dragged taut, and the dun's full straining weight was thrown into the effort of keeping the wagon on an even keel. The off-wheel stopped sliding. Joan threw a swift startled glance over her shoulder. She hadn't noticed that Russ had spotted her danger, seconds before she did.

"Lift 'em out of this!" he shouted at her, and she complied with shouts and handy reinwork. The sagging off-side of the wagon heaved up and pulled clear of peril. Kindred dismounted and stood in knee-deep water to undo his rope and loop it over the wagon tongue, where he could add a stabilizing pull in case of further trouble on the crossing.

"Thanks, cowboy!" Joan said, and to his surprise she added the white flash of her smile—the first he'd seen. He nodded and motioned her on. The crossing was finished in comparative safety.

Joan swung down as Russ dismounted. She took off her hat, cuffed the dust from it. Her face had resumed its usual stony expression, making it—not plain—but angularly regular, like a handsome boy's. She had been pretty with that brief smile, Kindred thought. Even now she was an impressive girl to look at, with her faintly dust-powdered, tawny brows and the fine level gray of eyes of her father. And Kindred had discovered he liked her boyish frankness; it gave him an ease with her which his usual reserve toward women denied him.

"Thank you," she said stiffly. "You maybe saved my life."

"Nothing," Russ said, and couldn't help adding, "You wouldn't smile again, I suppose."

She stiffened angrily before she saw that his blunt, young face held only good humor. She lowered her gaze. "I'm not fine to look at. Not like Andrea. Not much point to smiling."

"Why, ma'am, I never call a lady a liar, but—"

Joan flushed. "Don't spread me taffy that

way, mister. I'm not used to it. I'm just Saul Holly's tomboy brat. He had three daughters. I'm the one he couldn't marry off. So if I wanted to play a man, he figured to get some use out it. That's why I'm here."

She turned away, half-shy, half-angry, at having revealed so much of herself.

Holly rode up. "Son, that's a sharp pair of eyes. You knew what would happen before it happened, and you was ready. Say, I ain't seen you a whole lot. Where's Dirk been placin' you?"

"On drag."

"I'm tellin' him to try you somewhere else. We'll have you on point before this drive's over."

"On point," Russ Kindred said dazedly. "Yes, sir. Thank you."

Holly turned jovially to his daughter. "Still alive and kicking, eh, Blondy! Your sisters would be fainting sick by this time!" He cuffed her lightly on the head, as he might a boy.

Joan drew away with an irritable toss of her disarranged hair. "Don't do that, Saul," she said sharply.

"What do you mean?" Holly asked. "You always liked it."

"I'm not a child, Dad!" She swung lithely back to the wagon seat and flicked the wheelers into motion.

Holly stared after the wagon. "Dad! Dad, she calls me! Now what in Tophet's ailin' that girl?"

THEY made camp not far from the north bank. With coming night, chill, ground-mist gathered and thickened, turning to pink-pearl mist about the ruddy glow of the fire. There was a clink of tinware and no talk as the tired crew wolfed supper, squatting comfortably slack about the fire. With two women in camp, there was a natural restraint on an easy flow of man-talk.

Russ had noticed, however, that with Andrea Holly the men were apt to be shy and stumbling, but with Joan they joshed like a comrade. And Russ thought that the blunt forthrightness of her, which he found appealing, would probably frighten most men.

Holly took a stubby pipe from his mouth and spoke to the trail boss, breaking the silence. "Think there's likely to be trouble along the way with one of those border gangs?"

Dirk, a sun-blackened string of a man, shrugged taciturnly. "Hard to say. I hear talk back in Dallas that Tunstall and his gang were raiding up this way."

Holly nodded inexpressively, his big face lined and stolid. "Assign the night watch, Dirk."

Andrea Holly sat by her husband, giving Cort Davies a glance of arch warmth, and the kid was getting all calf-eyed under it. It was the sort of thing, Russ Kindred reflected, that was not supposed to go on, or if it did, and you saw it, you were supposed to pretend you didn't.

Russ Kindred lost his appetite. Cort had no control where women were concerned. He could forgive the kid because they were partners and because presumably Cort would outgrow it, but forgiveness wouldn't take the boy off the hook if it came to trouble. As for Andrea Holly, married to an old man, he could not say how much blame she deserved. Russ simply did not like the woman, and he could not say why.

The crew began to split for the night watch. Andrea Holly left the fire and walked casually to the rear of the wagon. Because he was watching for it, Russ was the only one to see the glance she gave Cort over her shoulder before she disappeared around the tailgate. Cort finished his supper without haste, picked his teeth for a while and exchanged insults with another puncher. Then he got up, stretched, and walked to the tail gate of the wagon with his cup and plate, dumping them into the wreck pan. Russ looked away to answer a remark by the puncher next to him. When he looked again, Cort was gone.

Russ stood, hesitating. He thought, maybe I'm wrong, but I've got to know. He walked to the wagon, laid his dishes in the wreck pan, and sent a swift glance into the darkness, seeing Cort gliding like a slim wraith into the fog, which abruptly swallowed him. Russ's gaze went the circle of the fire, saw no one watching, and promptly followed Cort.

The black trunks of a meager stand of

blackjack timber grew out of the misty obscurity. Russ stopped dead in his tracks as the voices of Andrea and Cort reached his ears. He could see them dimly, standing apart in the grove.

"You'd do anything for me, Cort?" Andrea asked musically.

"Ma'am, you name it!"

"Cort, I do need help. I need it very much." Her low voice was warm and seductive. "Saul has treated me badly."

"Ma'am, you say the word—"

"Your night watch will be finished at midnight. Meet me here then, and I'll explain. You're sweet, Cort, for understanding." She patted his cheek. "Now hurry on to your watch before you're missed."

RUSS shrank tight against the ground in a shallow, wind-worn hollow as Cort, returning, tramped past him not two yards distant. Kindred waited till Andrea had followed a moment later, then walked slowly back to camp with the step of an old man.

What can I do? he wondered, groping his way through the thick fog which was no deeper than the gray confusion in his mind. Andrea knew what she was doing; whatever she had in mind, she meant to drag the kid down with her. What can I do? Russ asked himself, and there was no answer. Cort was smitten with Andrea Holly as a boy can be with an older woman. And if Russ presumed to tell him the right of the matter, the boy would not believe him, would only hate him.

It's your hot potato, Cort, he thought, but that wasn't right either. A man did not stand by and watch his best friend destroy himself without lifting a finger. He must make a token effort, at least.

At camp, Russ went out to the remuda to find Cort cutting a horse from his string, readying for his nightwatch.

"Now you'll chase cattle for a while, eh?" Russ asked in a low voice.

Cort's voice was sharp in the gray silence of the fog which all but hid them. "Don't try to be funny, Russ!"

"I don't feel funny," Russ said slowly. "I don't feel funny at all."

"Get off my back, damn it! I've seen you and the whole camp watching in your smug way. I know what I'm doing! She's fine and sweet, and that damned old Holly treats her like a dog!"

Russ said flatly, "You been took, kid." He saw the blow coming, but not in time to duck it. Cort's hard-knuckled fist hammered his jaw, and the ground seemed to lurch and lift and slam him in the back. He dragged himself gingerly up as Cort swung to the saddle and pushed off to the bed-grounds. Russ looked after him until horse and rider were lost in darkness and fog. Russ only stood, a blackness in his mind, tasting bitter wrath at Andrea Holly.

"Oh, Russ." It was Joan's voice at his back, full of compassion and pity. He turned, squinting at the pale oval of her slim face.

"He hit me." There was pain in his voice, but not from the hurt of the blow. "He wouldn't listen. He just hit me."

"I know. I saw it. I followed you. I thought you might—might need someone."

"How can a woman do what she's doing?"

"Andrea?" There was a bitter edge to Joan's voice. "She's been doing it the seven years of her marriage to Dad, after he took her out of some dancehall in Dallas. She's sneaky and cruel, and she takes it all out on me when Dad isn't around because she knows I would never tell him. Saul's too big, too easy-hearted to think bad of anyone. Sometimes she baits him cruelly, and he is too simple and blunt a man to know what she's doing. Some day he will know, and when he does it will kill him. And sometimes I could kill her!"

Russ was shocked by the terrible bitter intensity of her. "Not you! Not a woman."

"Why not? Only another woman could see her clearly. Even though she takes constant pains to remind me that I'm a very poor sort of woman, dressing and acting like a man!"

"You never knew any women but Andrea?"

"How could I, growing up on Dad's ranch with my two older sisters married long before and the nearest neighbor fifty miles away?"

"Maybe that's it. Growing up, seeing what kind of a woman Andrea was, you never wanted to become one yourself."

She shook her head in confusion. "I don't

know. It's all so mixed up. Why am I telling you these things?"

"Things build up in a person. Maybe you had to tell someone."

"I don't know how to begin to be a woman!" she said, looking up at him, and her dimly-seen face seemed softened and appealing.

"Why—Joan," Russ said wonderingly. He took her arms and drew her in, kissing her gently. At first her body stiffened in startled rebellion, then her lips became pliant and soft with acceptance. When they drew apart, her eyes were shining, womanly and wanting at last.

Russ said soberly, "I'm fond of you, Joan. Remember it—in case anything happens."

Her voice was quick with alarm. "What could happen? Russ, is something wrong? Something you haven't told me?"

He hesitated. He had not told her of Cort's midnight rendezvous with Andrea, and he decided not to. If there was a risk to be taken, he would take it alone. He had to know for certain what Andrea was up to. It was the only way to save Cort.

FOR HOURS, Kindred lay rolled in his blanket, feigning sleep. He knew it was midnight when the first watch of night hawks came straggling in and the sleep-logged second watch made ready to ride out. Kindred got a horse and rode with them, falling casually behind in the fog. He cut off then at right angles and headed for the blackjack grove, silently hoping he wouldn't be missed. When he saw the dark shape of a lank-boughed oak lifting out of the neutral grayness, he dismounted, ground-hitched his horse, and went ahead on foot, moving like a shadow, into the grove. He saw Cort standing in a little clearing by his horse, the man and animal one nebulous shape to his straining eyes.

Kindred went down on hands and knees and flattened himself beneath the shadowy, low-growing branches of young oak brush. Here, a man might stand a yard away and not see him for the heavy mists.

The sounds of muffled hoofs and snapping twigs reached him, the sounds of a whole body of riders heading into the grove.

Cort straightened with alarm. He had expected only Andrea. The strange riders dismounted with a heavy creaking of leather and rattling of bridle chains.

"Hey, who's the kid?" one of them asked, just as surprised to see Cort, as Cort to see them all.

"He's with me!" It was Andrea Holly's voice. She came on horseback into the clearing and moved swiftly to the side of one of the riders. "David, this is Cort. He'll help us."

"Ah, I see," David said dryly. "Though when you told me you'd get one of your husband's crew to help, I didn't think you'd pick on a boy."

David! Kindred thought quickly. And the man had the clipped accent of an educated Englishman. This was David Tunstall, the black-sheep scion of a British family, who led a gang of border thieves, raiding road herds in the wild country north of the Brazos. Kindred had heard much of the man. But why was Andrea Holly meeting Tunstall as though by prearrangement?

"Mrs. Holly," Cort said in half-frightened voice, "what is this? Who are these fellows?"

"Now, Cort," Andrea said soothingly, "you gave me your promise, remember? Won't you hear me out?"

But the boy relaxed only slightly under the vibrant warmth of her voice.

"Saul is a brute," she went on. "I'm leaving him—now—tonight. And because I believe I've earned it, I am going to collect for all the misery he has caused me. I am going to take his herd from him and sell it in Dodge. Mr. Tunstall and his men will help."

"Tunstall!" Cort gasped.

"Cort—please listen. I didn't want to do it this way, but it's the only way. I'm married to an old man. He owes me for seven years of my life, tolerating his crochety whims. But he would give me nothing, and I couldn't take it without help. This drive gave me the chance, so I contacted Tunstall. We'll share in the profits, all of us. Oh, please, Cort—we need your help. It isn't as though Saul couldn't spare this herd. He's tremendously wealthy, and there'll be other years for him,

other herds. But this is my one chance!"

Cort's voice was low and miserable and unpersuaded. Now, he was only a badly frightened boy, Russ knew. "What did you want me to do, Ma'am?"

"It's easy, lad," Tunstall drawled. "If we're to take Holly's bloody herd, it should be now—at midnight—when cattle are most restless. Your job, as one of Holly's crew, someone they will trust, will be to draw off the attention of the night watch by some ruse, giving us a chance to get in close and stampede the herd off the bed-grounds."

CORT was silent and motionless for a long moment, and Russ's heart sank. Cort's very hesitation was acquiescence, he thought. And then abruptly Cort wheeled and lunged through the standing men for the edge of the clearing, making a sudden break that took the jay hawkers by surprise.

"Catch him!" Tunstall shouted. Two men dragged Cort down, just as he began to plunge through the brush into a mantle of fog that would have covered escape. Tunstall undid the lariat from his saddle and tossed it to a third man. "Tie him," he said curtly. "Gag him." For a moment there was no sound but Cort's wildly thrashing struggle, then he lay helplessly bound on the dank ground.

"Well, my dear," Tunstall said coldly to Andrea Holly, "he's no more a thief than you are a faithful wife. There's your answer. Though even a chap his age should have seen that you're a tramp who'll play every end against the middle to get what you want."

"What do you care?" she asked just as coldly.

"I don't," Tunstall said conversationally, "and I'm in a hurry. The nighthawks are still our biggest problem. Without this boy to help us, we'll have to take our chances on picking them off."

Andrea shrugged, "Well, once it's done, it should be no problem to get the herd moving and stampede it over the camp."

"No. No, that'll be easy enough." Tunstall scratched his chin. "Of course, when the herd goes over the camp, your husband and some of his party may be—"

"Are you getting soft in the head?" Andrea Holly interrupted with a low fierceness. "If we get away with Saul's herd and don't disorganize and cripple him first, what's to prevent him from following us? He outnumbers us two to one. I'm going all the way with this, David!"

"All right, men!" Tunstall called. "You know your positions. Let's push it, lads!"

Mounted again and ready, the riders filed from the grove, Andrea Holly with them, leaving Cort Davies bound hand and foot in the clearing. Russ Kindred came stiffly to his feet before their lessening shapes were swallowed in the fog. They'd be headed now for the bedgrounds of the herd, a half-mile from the camp.

They'd need time to circle behind it, if they were going to run it over the camp, and time to dispose of the nighthawks, unless they could take them by surprise. That should give Cort and himself time to warn Holly, convince him of his danger, and get a counter-threat organized against the raiders.

Cort stirred and grunted, seeing Kindred as the older man bent to cut him loose. "You're lucky, kid," Russ told him. "You're getting a second chance."

Holly accepted their warning with startling readiness when Russ and Cort swiftly roused him out.

Pausing only to snap a few brief questions, he belted on a gun and swung stiffly out of the wagon where he slept to rouse out the sleeping crew. In seconds, all were mounted and ready, having gathered up their gear and stowed it into the two wagons which Joe, the cook, and Joan Holly were to drive beyond the present camp site, out of the route of a possible stampede.

At Holly's forward sweep of arm, the mounted men thundered out of camp, straight for the bed grounds, to hit the raiders, if possible, before they hit the herd. Riding at the forefront with Saul Holly, feeling a sudden perverse exultation in the wide-open pace of his horse, Russ Kindred glanced sidelong at the old man, renewing his admiration. In this world of night and fog and dimly moving shadows, he rode with a bold wild impetus that set the pace for his men and carried them in his wake.

IT WAS Holly who first picked out the betraying sounds in the gray bank of silence ahead. He hauled in his horse, bringing the others to a halt with upraised arm. "They got the herd started," he said. "Pull far to the side so you won't get caught in front of it. Half of you—" with lightning composure, he rattled off names to avoid confusion—"go with Dirk, hit the raiders from the rear. The rest of you come with me. When the herd comes through, we'll hit it from the flank and try to turn it into a mill."

They started up their horses, and then the thundering herd and shouting riders were sweeping on them, drowning all other sound. Russ picked out a renewed outburst of shooting as Dirk and his men hit the jay-hawkers, and then he was aware of no conscious thought save being swept by the irresistible tide of stampede, riding at the flank to lend his whoops and horsemanship to the milling. For a long time, it seemed to Russ, the herd ran straight without a break, until it was as though he'd never known anything but the choke of dust, the whoops of men, the roar of guns, the rumbling cadence of surging hoofs. . . .

Then, almost imperceptibly, as the daring riders at the front relentlessly crowded the lead steers, the animals turned gradually in a circle. And blindly, the others followed that lead. The fog was lifting at last, as suddenly as it had settled much earlier, giving way to a white flood of full moonlight that highlighted the frightened cattle in sharp clarity. The problem of the riders who'd begun the mill was to keep clear of its center, for that would be the inevitable direction of the lead steers which they were turning.

Russ hauled up his heaving horse, the sobbing breath searing his lungs. He saw now in the full light, despite the dust and the night shadows, a rider coming up fast from the opposite flank, one of the raiders, trying to divert the efforts to turn the herd. It was too late. The lead steers were turning back on the rest of the herd, closing a great circle, driving into the others in a head-on collision of climbing, goring, frenzied animals.

"You fool," Russ gasped, for the raider was caught in the shrinking space within that circle! The raider's hat whipped away suddenly. A white face, seen by Russ Kindred in the moonlight, was fixed in a terrible scream. He saw it in the brief seconds before the circle closed and Andrea Holly was swallowed and vanished in the mass of heaving backs.

It was dawn on the prairie. Holly's surprise counter-attack had broken and scattered Tunstall's gang. Some had been shot down, the leader among them. A few escaped. Cort, Russ, and old Saul hunkered exhausted by a wagon, while Joan served them coffee. They watched the saddle-weary men drift one by one into camp and immediately head for the coffee boiler.

Presently, Holly glanced shrewdly around at Cort. "You got somethin' to say, young fellow?"

"Yes sir," Cort said meekly. "I just don't know how to say it. Reckon you know most of the story already, anyway."

"Put it this way, son," Holly said gently. "I know Andrea."

"Dad!" Joan said softly. "You knew?"

"Almost from the time we were married, honey. Hell, in the back of my mind, I knew it was wrong then. I knew she was near young enough to be my granddaughter, and likely marrying me for money. But there's no fool like an old fool. I didn't see what she was till afterward and even then, I hoped she might change. But she was no good, of course; she couldn't. Now, I just pity her."

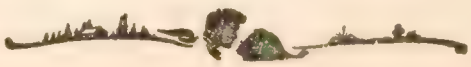
Cort stood suddenly and walked quickly away. Russ said, "Cort!"

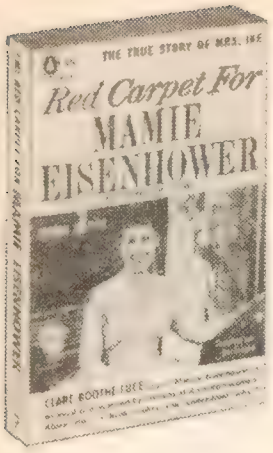
"Let him go, son," Holly said sharply. "He'll have to fight it out by himself. It's the way a boy becomes a man."

Joan laid a hand on his arm. "Let him go, Russ. . . . There are women like Andrea—but not many. Cort will learn that in his own time."

Russ looked down at her, seeing in full daylight the fine strong lines of her slender face. "You know," he said, "you're one in a million yourself."

Old Saul Holly chuckled and drained his coffee cup. "I always said you had sharp eyes, son."





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205PR

PRAIRIE WIND

By ROBERT E. TREVATHAN

LAURA felt the wind-driven dust strike harshly against her face. The dust settled in her long black hair at the nape of her neck, and her slim hands were already grimy. She kept her gaze away from the endless miles of sun-scorched land that lay about them, fixing her eyes on the rippling muscles of the sleek team of black mares pulling the wagon.

She glanced at Doug Farrel, who sat beside her. "This awful wind. Is it always like this?"

Doug squinted his gray eyes and moved his head, taking in half the horizon. "Might as well get used to the wind," he said. "It could stop within the hour, but it'll likely keep blowing all summer."

Laura frowned at the prospect. She started to say something, but just then Doug shouted at the mares and slapped the reins down hard against their rumps. The wagon lurched ahead crazily, the sudden movement throwing Laura against the backrest of the seat. Her grip was white-knuckled on the edge of the seat when Doug finally careened the wagon to one side and hauled up at a barbed wire fence.

The fence had been cut. Four strands of

SHE WAS willing to work the land she hated but not to fight for it

barbed wire lay curled back from one of the fence posts, glistening shiny in the brassy sun. And on the opposite side of the fence, Laura saw a man riding away on a tall pinto horse. Quickly, Doug swung to the ground and began unhitching one of the black mares.

"Gregory Evans," he said, jerking his blond head toward the man yonder, "Martin Johnson's foreman. They graze cattle to the south."

Doug was like a man possessed, yanking at the harness, fighting buckles and straps. She watched him fling himself aboard the mare and dig in his heels, racing through the cut fence. On a hillock a quarter mile away Doug overtook Evans. He sidled into the pinto, making a dive for Evans' neck.

The two men toppled from their saddles and slammed against the ground. They rolled over and over, swinging fists wildly and kicking their legs for purchase, stirring up a pall of dust with their threshing. The black mare and pinto trotted aside. Laura then saw a man on a beautiful white horse ride up to the fighters. He was a big man wearing a wide brimmed white hat, and he folded his hands over his saddlehorn and calmly watched the fight.

The men were on their feet now, struggling at one another like some wild animals of this barren land. For two full minutes they fought this way, silhouetted on the hillock against the dull sky. The man on the white horse sat motionless, watching. Then one of the men went down. Laura strained her eyes against the dust in the wind, attempting to identify Doug Farrel, her husband since two hours ago.

One man dragged the other to the pinto horse, and Laura knew that Doug had won. Doug looked up at the man on the white horse and said nothing. The man shook his head, and even from where she sat Laura knew that this violence hadn't settled anything, that it was just a postponement of more trouble to come.

Doug led the mare back to the wagon. He was streaked with sweat and dust and one sleeve of his new shirt was ripped away. Shocked, Laura saw a strange expression of pleasure in his sun-blackened face. She knew suddenly that Doug had actually enjoyed this fight, and her grip on the wagon seat tightened.

"He'll think twice before he cuts *my* fence it took to form the words with his smashed lip. As he began harnessing the mare, Laura asked, "Why—why was your fence cut?"

"Cattlemen don't like fences," Doug said again," Doug panted, wincing with the effort simply, pushing the mare next to the wagon tongue. "But I reckon I taught Gregory Evans a lesson he won't soon forget." The wagon tilted to one side as Doug climbed up and sat down beside her. "That was Martin Johnson on the white horse, biggest cattleman in the country."

She took a handkerchief and gently wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth. Satisfaction was in his gray eyes, and she realized that Doug was not the same man she'd known in Philadelphia a year ago. She had followed him out here as she'd promised, but he couldn't expect her to condone this sort of violence.

"This fighting," she said, watching him intently, "it's not the way civilized people should live."

Stubbornness came into his face and he shook out the reins over the mare's rumps.

"You could have explained, talked to him," she said.

"I spoke the only kind of language cattlemen understand," he replied.

For several miles the wagon creaked down the faint road across the prairie. Laura Farrel felt the cruel wind against her face and neck, and her dark eyes scanned this treeless, strange land that was her new home. They topped a sloping rise of the prairie and came to a small frame house. Off to one side was a garden, green with young tomato slips and string beans. It reminded Laura of the well-tended farms in the East, and for a moment she experienced a faint hope.

A frail woman wearing a printed cotton dress came to the door of the house. Doug made the introductions.

"I'll come visit you soon, so we can get acquainted," Grace Anderson said to Laura. Then her thin face shifted quickly to Doug. She looked him over carefully, nodding her head, as though she understood what had happened back there at the fence line without being told.

"Ben ain't here now," the woman said. "Just put the plowshare out by the barn." Her

voice was high-pitched, and Laura noted that her attention was directed at Doug.

After Doug had dropped the mended plowshare at the barn door, and they were down the road a way, Laura said, "That woman hardly looked at me. What was wrong?"

Doug grinned foolishly, squinting his eyes ahead. "Grace knew that you were tired from the long trip," he said. "She and Ben will come to see us in a few days, like she said."

Laura sat very still on the wagon seat, her shoulders squared. She didn't especially care for people that invited themselves to visit you. That people out here were some different she understood, but they were so earthy—so matter-of-fact. She stole a glance at Doug. His eyes were still glued to some distant point on the prairie. For a moment she attempted to remember him as the serious law student she'd known back in Philadelphia. His studies had gone well enough for two years, until the railroad began distributing promotional literature advertising this land in Kansas.

Excitement had shone in Doug's face as he poured over the printed matter, his blonde hair falling across his forehead. She tried recapturing something of this feeling, for she too had caught Doug's enthusiasm for coming out here. But now that she was here, her only emotion was one of disappointment.

True, she still loved him, but nothing seemed to be right. She felt it in the harsh wind against her face, and some intangible fear lurked on this wild land that lay around them. She thought about the big man on the white horse; she remembered how he'd sat his mount and calmly watched the two men fighting. There was a feeling of permanence about Martin Johnson she couldn't explain. But Laura did know that he stood for violence, and that Doug was involved in it. And this was a threat to her own happiness.

A SINGLE big cottonwood tree stood in the middle of the quarter-section, and Doug had built the three-room frame house nearby. Out back was a barn, with a lean-to on one side where a few chickens roosted at night. There was one milk cow, a spotted animal that grazed at a line of scrub postoak trees to the south at a dry creekbed. And the well was at the back door of the house, the sun-dried rope hanging in a handful of loops on a brace nailed to one of the windless uprights.

From the beginning, Laura fought the ever-present dust that filtered into her cupboard, covering the glassware, the cups and the plates. She could taste the dust in their food, and her yellow curtains in the kitchen were dingy with it by the third day. But she was stubborn in her own way, continually sweeping and mopping the floors and soaking and washing the dust from the curtains and the clothes in the huge black kettle in the back yard.

Doug plowed up a strip of land near the well for her garden. She planted okra and lettuce and string beans, and one evening Doug brought home three dozen tomato slips, which he set out in two rows close to the well. But most of the time Doug was away from the house, working his wheat and corn with the black mares or chopping wood down at the creek.

"If I can cultivate and improve one-fifth of our quarter section by the third year, we can save twenty percent of the remaining payments," Doug said. And he was determined to do it.

But some barrier had been born between them that first day, and it seemed to widen no matter how hard she tried. At night, when Doug was in deep sleep brought on by the weariness from sweating and working with the raw land, she would lie awake listening to the rustling of the wind in the big cottonwood tree. Then after sleep came, she would often sit up in bed with a start, wide awake—and there was the incessant wind rattling about the corners of the house and scrabbling across the yard. And she knew that it would never stop.

One evening at sundown, when supper was on the table and Laura had just given the floor a damp mopping, Doug came in from milking. As she strained the milk from the pail into a stone crock, she glanced at Doug, knowing what he'd be doing. Every evening when he came inside from doing his chores, he'd knock his slouch hat against the hat tree before hanging it up.

It was no different this time. He went through his little ritual of swatting his hat,

and again she watched the dust particles settle onto her clean floor. But this was the last time, she told herself firmly. She was doing her best to make a tidy home for him, and he could at least show her *some* consideration.

"From now on," she said in a level tone, "would you mind beating the dust from that old hat outside the house?"

Doug turned around, wide innocence in his gray eyes and sun-blackened face. "Huh?" He glanced down, suddenly aware of the dust-matted object in his hand.

"It's hard enough trying to keep this house clean with the dust blowing in all the time," she continued, "without you bringing in more."

He stood there awkwardly. "Oh!" he said.

"I married all of them and now I have a monopoly."

"Guess I never thought." He went out the kitchen door, and after a short moment she heard him beating his hat against a porch support.

It was odd, Laura thought as they were eating, that this little victory didn't bring her the satisfaction she'd thought it would. But out here one had to be practical, she told herself, and she could think of nothing more impractical than to make unnecessary work when there was so much to be done.

After the meal a creaking sound of wagon wheels came to them from off the prairie. Doug folded his month-old copy of the Topeka Weekly Record and put it on the table by the kerosene lamp. "That'll be the Andersons," he said matter-of-factly. "They waited till a full moon to pay us that visit. They're too busy in the daytime."

Laura stiffled a small cry that welled up in her throat. She'd washed the kitchen curtains this morning and hadn't yet hung them up. As Doug went outside, she rushed into the bedroom where the curtains still lay across the bed. She picked up a dingy yellow pair and, moving into the lamplight coming from the living room, began shoving them onto a curtain rod. Her slim hands worked feverishly, jerking the rod against the flimsy material. Suddenly she felt the rod rip and tear through the curtain loop. Doug's voice came to her from the rear of the house as he greeted the Andersons. The menfolk tromped onto the back porch, and then Grace Anderson's high-pitched voice rose above the others.

Crushing the curtains against her face, Laura held back the tears that threatened her eyes, and the dust in the wind-blown material assailed her nostrils. Viciously, she flung the curtains onto the bed. Then, her shoulders squared, she moved from the room, entering the living room as the company came in through the back door.

GRACE ANDERSON stepped ahead of Ben, her smiling, raw-boned husband, and came toward Laura. "I brought you some sand plum perserves," she said, beaming warmly.

Laura took the jar of preserves. "Why, thank you," she said. Her voice sounded wooden, even to herself.

Doug brought up the extra chair to the kitchen table, asking the company to sit. For himself, he emptied the woodbox in a corner and up-ended it at one side of the table. Straddling the box, Doug said, "I'm sure Grace and Ben would enjoy some coffee, Laura."

She moved toward the cookstove. "Don't go to any bother," Ben Anderson said. His voice was deep and kindly, Laura thought as she took the coffee pot from the rear of the stove and put it over the firebox. "It's no trouble," she said, but she was thinking how much more appropriate it would have been

to receive the Andersons in the living room. But it was just like Doug, dragging up the chairs to the kitchen table like some excited kid.

Laura found herself under strain while Grace Anderson talked about a new family that had taken a quarter-section to the west, and then about a baby born to someone else that Laura had never heard of. The conversation was one-sided, with Laura occasionally murmuring an answer to a direct question.

Doug and Ben sat on the opposite side of the table, the raw-boned farmer sipping his coffee from his saucer and nodding gravely as Doug spoke of crops and the coming of winter. Then she heard Martin Johnson's name mentioned and then Gregory Evans', the men who grazed cattle to the south. Grace Anderson heard the names too, for Laura saw worry come into the woman's thin face and she became suddenly quiet.

Ben looked at his wife and gave her a small reassuring smile. "It will be all right," he said, and placed his calloused hand on hers on the table.

Laura glanced at Doug, and there was something in his gray eyes akin to the expression on Ben's face, and she knew there was something here that she didn't fully understand.

When the Andersons left, she and Doug stood on the front porch watching the wagon fade into the shadows on the moonlit prairie. The night was cool, and she hugged her arms against her bosom, feeling Doug's strong presence beside her, yet conscious of the emptiness between them. Doug leaned a shoulder against a porch support, gazing out toward the big cottonwood tree where the wind swayed the branches, rustling the dry leaves.

"You needn't have been concerned about the cutrains," he said. "I saw you staring at the windows."

"I didn't want anyone to think I'm lazy," she said quickly. She wanted these people to like her, but she knew tonight she had failed to make them understand.

"We can't fight against this land," Doug said, facing her. "We have to bend with it, give with its moods, like the old cottonwood younder in the wind. Otherwise it'll break us. Sometimes the land can be cruel, but it can be gentle, too. It's good farm land, and when people accept it as such the other things will work themselves out."

Laura remembered the fight Doug had had with Gregory Evans. "It seems that everyone doesn't think this is farm land," she said. "What about those cattlemen?"

"You might not like violence," Doug said, moving toward the door, "but when people don't think alike there's bound to be some trouble. You can't escape it. We're here to stay though."

She followed him indoors, aware once again of the change that had been born in Doug since a year ago. And she also knew that it was his attachment to this dry land that stood between them as husband and wife.

It wasn't that she had no feelings toward the land herself. She had spent hour upon hour working in the garden, making their vegetables grow, carrying water to the plants from the well. But Doug's devotion went deeper than this. Somehow he reminded her of the first impression she'd had of Martin Johnson as he sat his white horse watching the men fight that day. Doug and the cattleman didn't think alike, but they both had a quality of permanence about them. And Laura suddenly realized that this land, as vast as it was, wasn't big enough to hold the two of them.

Laura fashioned a split-riding skirt and learned to ride the gentler of the two black mares during the summer. When the house work was done, and when she'd dressed down the yard against the blowing dust with water from the well, she rode about the quarter-section. Thinking that she should make an effort to become better acquainted with her neighbors, since she truly loved Doug and was determined to share his life here, she forced herself to pay the Andersons a visit. And when she did, she learned the roots of the trouble that Doug and the other settlers faced.

She approached the Anderson place from the south, riding up past the stand of corn and then the garden. She admired the big, healthy-red tomatoes and the tender okra ready for cutting. Thinking of all the work

she'd put into her own garden plot, Laura felt a kindred spirit here, and for the first time believed that she might have something in common with Grace Anderson.

GRACE invited her inside the house, but after a moment of pleasantries, Laura felt herself sitting stiffly on the frayed sofa, her shoulders squared. She tried to relax but it was impossible. She couldn't get the pictures of Martin Johnson and his big white horse out of her mind. It was though she were waiting for something dreadful to happen that never did. But she was sure it would, and she knew that the cattleman would be the cause of it.

"Why can't the people here get along with the cattlemen?" she asked Grace finally.

A sadness came into the woman's thin face, and Laura read a little of fear there, too. "The cattlemen were here before us," Grace Anderson said, folding work-worn hands in her lap. "They fought the Indians and renegade whites to bring their cattle up the trail from Texas. They used this land to graze their cattle while waiting until the market was good for shipping. Then the government and the railroad began selling quarter-sections of land to the settlers. We began fencing in the range and raising crops. That was when the trouble started."

"But it's not right," Laura said, remembering that Doug had told her of paying the railroad ten percent down on their own land. And he had done so much work to improve it. "This land didn't *belong* to those cattlemen to start with. Can't they understand?"

"The trouble lies deeper with Martin Johnson," Grace said. "Three years ago his wife, a really brave woman, used to ride with him and his crew up the trail. A number of settlers with cattle of their own objected to the passage of the Texas cattle. The cattle had a fever, and the settlers' animals became infected. Once some settlers made a night raid on Johnson's camp. There was shooting, and Martin Johnson's wife was killed."

Laura caught her breath. Grace pressed her hand, saying, "Of course we felt terrible about what had happened, but Johnson wouldn't be consoled. And since that time he's steadily pressured the settlers. When time comes for shipping, he drives his heard to the railroad, not caring what lies in his way. Last year his cattle trampled down twenty acres of Ben's corn. It almost ruined us."

For a moment Laura thought of this woman who had ridden up the cattle trail at her husband's side. She tried to visualize the effect her death had had on Martin Johnson. Surely it had been a great blow, but it didn't sanction the cattleman's treatment of the settlers. Then she remembered something that gave her a start. It was the look of pleasure on Doug's face after his fight with Gregory Evans, Johnson's foreman. And she knew now that the cattlemen weren't the only ones to blame for the trouble since Johnson's wife was killed.

"But can't the settlers and cattlemen get together and talk this over peacefully?" she asked.

"That's been tried, young woman." It was Ben Anderson's deep voice, and Laura turned and saw him standing in the doorway. "We have tried to reason with Johnson," Ben went on, "but you might as well have been talking to a fence-post."

"But it's so senseless," Laura said.

"All the cattlemen respect is force," Ben said. His eyes flitted to the far side of the sparsely furnished room. Laura followed his glance, and she saw the long-barreled rifle leaning in the corner. "But I can handle force," Ben said with finality.

She saw the hardness come into Ben Anderson's face, and his raw-boned frame took on new stature as he experienced some inner conviction. Laura knew that further words would be useless.

Riding back home, Laura sat very still and very straight on the black mare. She was half-conscious of how the animal held its head high against the harsh wind that swept across the land. The dust in the wind stung her face, and it was like a promise of more violence to come.

The trouble came one morning a week later, when Laura was mopping a new dust layer from her kitchen floor. She was alone on the quarter-section, Doug having gone to help Ben Anderson dig a sweet potato cellar.

She noticed a sudden stillness about the morning air and went to the front door and looked out across the dry flats. The sun was blotted out by a dust cloud rising from the southeast.

Then the sounds came to her, muffled at first, but quickly becoming more distinct. A pounding rumble erupted somewhere out on the prairie. It was coming nearer. Immediately, Laura identified the noise. The herd of Texas cattle came crashing into view through the yellow-red dust cloud of their own making, appearing to pop up right out of the ground.

The herd was moving a half-mile beyond the big cottonwood tree, going in a northernly direction. Laura had glimpses of red-splotched sides as the animals trailed through the dust. The noise was deafening, filling the morning stillness. A continuous clacking and rasping sound came to her as the long, curved horns of the steers sideswiped together. She saw a big man roweling the flanks of his white horse. As he raised his sixgun and fired into the sky, Laura knew it was Martin Johnson. Whoops and yells came from other riders to the rear of the herd, and more shots were flung skyward as the cattle raced ahead in one massive force.

A SOB caught in her throat. Standing petrified in the doorway, Laura saw that the cattle were being stampeded straight toward the Anderson's quarter section. Her fingers ached from gripping the door jamb. She stood there a full minute before she remembered that one of the black mares was in the lot at the barn. She turned away then and ran through the house, slamming out the back door.

The black mare was not the gentler one, out after struggling with it desperately for what seemed an eternity, Laura got it to take the bridle bits. She got on its back on the second try, not minding that her long house dress pushed up above her knees. Reining the mare around, she heeled it through the lot gate and past the big cottonwood tree, toward the drags of the onrushing herd. In her mind she could see Ben Anderson with his long-barreled rifle, and she thought of the look in his eyes when he spoke of the cattlemen. She caught her breath sharply when she thought of Doug. For he was there working with Ben, and he was of a same mind.

The dust thrown up by the stampeding herd was a gritty, stinging force flung into her face. She bit her lip to keep from swallowing it, but she couldn't keep it out of her eyes. Sixgun reports came to her and she felt the rumble of the prairie through the mare's hooves. Suddenly the Anderson's house loomed up ahead and to the left, and she knew the herd had passed close by. She drew reins near the house, the clash of horns and the cries of the riders gradually drawing away from her.

The dust lifted then, blown away by a gust of southeast wind. She blinked the burning sensation from her eyes and looked at the ground. The full impact of the destructive herd was there. Grace Anderson's garden was pounded into the earth, the okra and ripe tomatoes trampled beneath the sharp hooves of the charging animals. Thinking of her own garden, she knew how much work Grace Anderson had put into hers.

She slid off the mare and stood there in the flattened garden that lay around her. The extent of this wanton destruction shocked her keenly, like a physical blow. She looked up then. The man on the beautiful white horse was there in the Anderson's yard, as she had almost known he would be.

Martin Johnson was a huge man with reddish hair streaked with gray, and his fiery eyebrows stood out bushy over his sharp blue eyes now bloodshot from stampeding the herd. He wore a big white hat, and she saw an odd satisfaction on his beefy, red-mottled face. Her hands grew restive as she watched him.

Johnson threw back his head and laughed coarsely, his gaze striking the havoc made by his cattle. Dismounting, he strode forward to the porch of the house where Grace Anderson stood alone, her hands clasped, twisted together.

"You nesters should know who runs this range by now, I reckon," the cattleman said in a booming voice. "I was here running cattle before you ever heard of Kansas."

Laura noticed that she was standing on some object on the ground. It was a piece of

hoe handle about three feet long, broken by the passing herd of Texas cattle. She picked it up and moved ahead, toward Johnson. When still a few yards away, the cattleman caught sight of her out of the tail of his eye.

"What have we here?" he grunted.

Her mouth set firmly, Laura took another step forward so that she would be close enough to the man. Then, her right hand gripping one end of the piece of hoe handle, she swung it with all the strength of her young body. Johnson saw the motion and raised an elbow to ward off the blow. He was a fraction too slow.

He roared in pain, bringing up a big hand to his crushed ear. As she hauled back to strike again, Laura was shocked at the inner pleasure she experienced in doing this. She then saw deep anger come into the man's bloodshot eyes. He snaked out a hand, grasping her wrist in a steel-like grip, making her drop the hoe handle. But she was more furious than afraid, and her slim hands clawed at his face. The cattleman shook her roughly, just once, then let go. Caught off balance, Laura stumbled backward a step and fell down. When she looked up, Doug was running around the side of the house.

SHE SAW Johnson's hand jerk downward toward the sixgun on his thigh, but just then Doug's charging form left the ground, and he slammed into the cattleman's legs. The momentum of Doug's body knocked the big man flat.

Doug hit him twice again, but then Johnson got to his feet and gripped Doug's body in a rib-pressing bear hug. Wind was forced from Doug's lungs in racking gasps, and for a moment he almost went limp. But he managed to butt his head into the big man's face, and as Johnson fell back, Doug worked an arm free and struck him a solid blow to the stomach. The hold was broken and Doug followed through, smashing with his fists and absorbing punishment as Johnson landed crushing blows of his own. But Doug ended it in a straight-on punch against the man's chin.

"I'd keep still if I was you." It was Ben Anderson's steady voice, and he was standing on the porch with the long-barreled rifle in his hands. Laura looked up and saw that the raw-boned farmer was talking to Gregory Evans, who'd ridden up on his tall pinto horse and had a hand on his sixgun.

Doug helped Martin Johnson aboard his white horse and stood there holding the reins, still gasping for air. Staring up at the cattleman, Doug wiped blood from his mouth. "This thing is bigger than you are, Johnson," he said. "You run us out and a dozen more settlers will take our place. But we'll fight you as long as we have the strength to fight with."

Doug flung Johnson his reins. "Let us know when you're ready to make your next drive. We'll help route your cattle by our fields."

Johnson kept watching Laura, and she sensed that something stirred deep within him. He spoke to her finally, a sadness touching his heavy face. "You remind me of my wife," he said. "She had faith in me."

Laura took Doug's hand in her own, and the big man on the white horse studied them both. "I see the same kind of faith here," he said. "I'd forgotten what it was like. It's good to know that it's still alive."

Before leaving the yard with Gregory Evans, the cattleman spoke to Ben Anderson and his wife. "I'll stop by on the way back," he said. "I'd like to pay you for the damages I've done."

Riding behind Doug on the black mare, Laura was unaware of the wind rustling the paper-dry leaves in the big cottonwood tree. For she was thinking of her garden, planning to share it with the Andersons.

They slid off the mare at the porch. The back of Doug's shirt was split, and drying blood on one elbow peeked through a sleeve. He started toward the door, then paused as he remembered something. Removing his slouch hat, he went to a porch support and began knocking out the dust.

Laura took the hat from his bruised hand and led him inside the house. She swatted the hat viciously against the hat tree, little concerned about the dust that settled on her floor. And she knew then that this was truly the beginning.

WHEN Americans went to war, between 1941 and 1945, they took a lot of things with them besides guns and fighting strength. They took American slang and chewing gum and baseball, all of which were easily portable. They also, believe it or not, took rodeo.

During the war years, pessimists were always foretelling the doom of our national sports. Even the Baseball Commissioner wondered gloomily at one point whether that game would last another season. And rodeo, which was then far less wide-spread than it is now, suffered even more from gas rationing and the lack of contestants.

But baseball managed to hang on in the USA, and so did rodeo. Baseball also went along with the GI ball players, who pitched and batted all over the world. And when the GI top-hands went to Europe, to Africa, or to Asia, they didn't abandon rodeo. They brought it with them—and whenever they put on a show, they left the Europeans, the Africans and the Asiatics goggle-eyed.

It was mostly after the shooting had stopped that the men had time for bronc-busting. But one rodeo on the banks of the Rhine was held to the accompaniment of artillery fire, early in 1945. And, more than a year earlier, the soldiers had staged a show in New Caledonia in the Pacific.

Most of these shows were fairly impromtu. Chutes were improvised out of old packing cases, and the spectators squatted on the ground, without so much as a fence to separate them from the action. But, since the stock was mostly borrowed from nearby farms, the ringside seats weren't especially dangerous.

There were several shows, however, which were up to professional standards. One of the first was in Honolulu in the spring of 1944. The high point of that one was Champion Fritz Truan's bulldogging steers from a jeep, since there was a complete lack of dogging horses in those parts. Fritz also won the saddle-bronc honors, and the show was so successful that another was planned for the following year.

It was held as scheduled, but Fritz Truan couldn't make it. He was killed on Iwo Jima that February. In May, in the Honolulu stadium, 6,000 people rose to pay silent tribute to the hero, while the horse he had ridden to victory the year before stood, empty-saddled, in a spotlight.

The problem for soldiers organizing a rodeo, in far-flung places was mostly finding rodeo stock. There was never any shortage of soldiers who were willing to straddle a bucking bronc.

In India and, especially, Australia, the animals were easier to find. The biggest disappointment for the top-hands in India was the docility of the Brahma bulls. There were plenty of them available for rodeo appearances, but they just wouldn't get into the spirit of the thing.

Rather than buck a cowboy off, these Indian Brahmas would simply lie down. And if a clown came along to tease one of them into action, the bull would, like as not lick his hand like a big friendly dog.

The GI top-hands had a great time putting on their world-wide rodeos, and when the war was over they were in fine shape to compete in rodeos back home. In fact, rodeo got its biggest boost in the early post-war years. There were more contestants than ever before digging into their pockets for entry fees. And some of these men undoubtedly forked their first bronc thousands of miles away from the American West.

Adios,
THE EDITORS

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

THE CAPRICORN GIRL

DEC. 20 — JAN. 20

ON DECEMBER 30, 1853, the treaty providing for the Gadsden Purchase was signed at Mexico City, increasing the territory of our expanding Southwest. This peaceful process of growth and expansion is typical of the Capricorn personality, for any woman with Sun in this Sign is constantly disciplining herself toward progress.

The Capricorn girl is conservative, cautious, self-reliant, a born teacher capable of leading others to success and victory. She is an excellent homemaker, among the most efficient businesswomen, a loving wife, and she excells as a mother. She may not seem as affectionate, on the surface, as other women, she does not like being demonstrative or aggressive. Her love is the quiet, durable type.

Usually she believes in an engagement period, for marriage to her is a serious business. She cannot abide mistakes, especially foolish ones. She is determined to know her lifemate well before consenting to marriage. She wants to assess his strong and weak points correctly and to size him up as a husband and father.

She admires the type of success Aries men attract, and enjoys sharing their business interests with them. She finds Taurus attractive in his self-discipline, a trait she shares with him. The Taurus-Capricorn marriage is a good bet, and security can be attained comparatively early in life. Rarely does the Capricorn girl approve of Gemini as a husband, but she finds the Gemini personality attractive in a friend. She can find success and happiness in marriage with Cancer.

She is at home with Virgo. Libra men are somewhat enigmatic to the Capricorn girl. Scorpio men are among the few who can hold Capricorn's devotion for life. She enjoys life with Sagittarius, respects Aquarius, and can help Pisces find success. Her practical turn of mind complements Sagittarius and Pisces, and she can be a bulwark of strength in marriage to a Pisces husband.

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose three cents instead of stamp.)

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STRANGE RIDER

by JOSEPH WAYNE

THE STORY SO FAR: For a stranger, COLE KNAPP is asking too many questions about Anchor Ranch. SIDONIE CAREW, prompted by her stepmother, ZELDA, and Zelda's son, MARTY KELDSON, believes Cole has come to claim part of the ranch, the inheritance of her missing brother, ANDY. Since the death of cattle king BILL CAREW, Keldson has been running Anchor and urging Sidonie to marry him, claiming she needs him to look after her interests. After a fight which Keldson unfairly wins, Cole, badly beaten up, is

thrown in jail, but Sidonie bails him out, advising him to leave town. Instead, Cole finds refuge at the home of BEN DAVIS, and his daughter-in-law, JANET, who rents a room to Cole, saying she will back anyone who fights Anchor. Janet is pregnant and a widow, since her husband was killed leading the Regulators, a group of small ranchers trying to save their homesteads from the raids of Keldson and his Anchor men.

PART TWO

ON THE MORNING of the fourth day after his fight with Keldson, Cole felt better. His bruises were healing and some of the soreness had gone out of his muscles. He announced at breakfast to Janet and Ben that he couldn't stay idle any longer. He had to get out, and he wanted to see Judge Benson.

"And I want to see Sidonie Carew," Cole said. "Does she come to town very often?"

Janet shook her head. "Not often. And you can't go to Anchor. They'd kill you."

He said, "I wasn't figuring on going to Anchor. I thought maybe I could see her without going there. What does she do all day? Where does she go? She doesn't strike me as a girl who would stay inside."

Janet smiled. "No, she isn't." She paused, and added reluctantly, "She rides, mostly on Triangle Mesa east of the house. But that's a dangerous place for you, Cole. Don't go there, please."

He liked her use of his given name. It had a pleasant sound on her lips. But his voice was firm. "I didn't come here to stay out of danger. I'll be all right."

He left the table, with both of them watching him. Their expressions mirrored an anxiety that was almost frantic. He went to his room, buckled on his gun belt and put on his hat. Then he went through the front room and out into the harsh sunlight.

The hour was early, and the streets deserted, but he found Judge Benson in his office over the bank, a long cigar in his mouth. An unhappy expression came into Benson's eyes when he recognized his visitor.

"So you're still here. I thought you'd be gone by now."

Cole smiled. "Judge, you knew I was still around. You also know I don't intend to leave." He sat down without being invited to do so, straddling a straight-backed chair and resting his arms on its back. "Funny thing about this country, Judge—everything moving along fine and dandy till I showed up. What'd I do to upset things?"

"Nothing is upset. You give yourself too much credit, Knapp."

"I don't think so. You're worried. You can't keep it out of your face. Maybe you're wondering if you're on the right side. Maybe you're thinking that between me and Ben Davis and Bud's widow the Regulators could be revived, put back on their feet the way they were before Keldson killed Bud."

"I'm busy, Knapp. If—"

Cole interrupted, "Or was it the question I asked about Andy Carew that started you worrying? What are you hiding, Judge?"

"Damn it, I'm not hiding anything." There was anger in Benson's voice. "There's nothing funny about the way you've been treated here. You're a troublemaker and nobody likes a troublemaker. It's that simple. Personally, I think Sidonie should have left you in jail."

"I'll bet you do," Cole said. "I've been wondering about Sidonie. She's not like Marty Keldson or his mother. I'd say she's got some notions about right and wrong. Bill Carew must have planted them in her when she was a girl. Or maybe it was her mother."

The judge's voice showed an exaggerated patience. "What do you want, Knapp? Information about Andy Carew? I can't give it to you. I don't know where he is."

"I'm not here for that. You were Bill Carew's lawyer, from what I hear. I want to know about Bill's will."

"You'll find out anyway so I might as well tell you," the judge said wearily. "The will left all of Bill's cash money to his widow, and it was a sizeable amount. I was his lawyer, but I was his friend, too. He talked to me as a friend. He left Zelda the money because he thought she'd move back to Denver. She was never happy here, and Bill knew it, though he did everything he could to satisfy her."

"Who got Anchor?"

"Andy and Sidonie, share and share alike. Andy was given a year to claim his half. If he doesn't show up in that time, the outfit, lock, stock and barrel, goes to Sidonie. Until

the year's up, Zelda's responsible for its management."

"You reckon she'll leave at the end of the year?" Cole asked.

"Depends. She wants to see Marty and Sidonie married. If that happens, she'll stay. Otherwise, she'll go." He rose. "Now if you'll excuse me. . . ."

"Sure." Cole got up, too. "You say you were Bill Carew's friend. If you were, you're Sidonie's friend, and if you're that, you'll do something to bust up this marriage notion. I haven't known Marty Keldson long, but it's been long enough to know that nothing could be worse for Sidonie than marrying him."

BENSON fumbled in the pocket of his vest for a match. His eyes at last met Cole's. "What's your interest in Andy and Sidonie Carew? You bucking for a slice of Anchor yourself?"

Cole grinned. "That's what everybody else thinks. Why not you?" He went to the door and opened it, then turned and stared at Benson. "What are you bucking for, Judge?"

"Get out of here."

"You're riding a tough bronc, Judge. I think you're wishing to hell you were off. But you don't know how to get off without breaking your neck, do you?" He stepped into the hall and closed the door behind him.

Cole went down the outside stairway and crossed to the livery stable. Benson was the one man in town, Cole thought, who could help if he were goaded into it. Then he shrugged. Perhaps Benson was honest only on the surface, or perhaps he was afraid.

The horse had been on hay and grain for four days and nights. He'd been standing in his stall all day. Cole eyed his bunched muscles, then swung with anticipation into the saddle.

His side hurt with every plunge of the bucking horse, but Cole let him have it out, then struck upstream from the town, letting the horse work the kinks out of his muscles.

A mile from Cedar, Cole found a place to climb to the mesa. When he reached the top, he angled toward Anchor's buildings, but he stopped just below the crest of a ridge while still half a mile from the house.

Patiently, now, he waited, hoping to catch Sidonie as she left. The day dragged, a litter of cigarette stubs growing around Cole's feet. Then in late afternoon he saw her, alone, her long shadow moving along the ground beside her.

She was too close to Anchor for Cole to hail, so he only watched. She rode well, he thought with admiration. Probably she had spent the whole day on the range, riding to escape being in the house, to escape her stepmother and the lavish oak paneling and potted palms and everything else in that great, sprawling stone monument to Zelda Carew's ambitious whims.

When Sidonie disappeared, Cole rode back to town, thinking of the girl and what lay ahead for her. Surely anyone as sensitive as she must hate the grossness of Marty Keldson. And yet many women, Cole knew, married men they hated.

He could only guess the intensity of pressure being brought to bear on Sidonie. Still, she didn't seem the kind of girl who would surrender to pressure.

Well, there was tomorrow and the day after that, and a great many more days ahead. He'd keep trying to see her. He'd talk to her. Somehow he'd find a way to help her. There was always a way if a man had the patience to find it.

He reined into the livery stable, surprised to see Dusty Rhodes hurrying toward him. "A gun slinger hit town this afternoon looking for you," said the deputy excitedly. "Described you and called you by name. You're his man, all right."

"What'd he look like?"

"Shorter'n you. Thinner. Pair of eyes like a fish, and a gun tied low on his leg. Cutaway holster. Know him now?"

Cole sighed wearily. He said, "No, I don't know him."

He wheeled toward the archway and the street. This, then, was Keldson's move. If you had money, you could hire a gun. The more money, the faster the gun.

Cole had an idea this gun would be very fast, for if Marty Keldson didn't have enough money of his own, he could easily borrow more from his mother.

As he stepped into the street, there was an odd tightness in all of Cole's muscles. Then his jaw thrust forward, both in anger and anticipation, the tightness leaving him. Whoever the gunman was, he wouldn't have to hunt for Cole.

Loose and easy, he moved into the street, his gaze on the batwings of the Staghorn, thinking about the long trail he'd been following since Andy Carew's death, wondering where is would lead from here.

ANDY had been cut down by a drygulcher's bullet, without even seeing his killer. Cole, who had made a friend of Andy, hadn't seen the murderer, either. But he'd read sign at the site of Andy's death. And he'd questioned many a man in the desert country concerning the stranger who had come immediately before Andy's death and gone soon after it, heading north.

And so Cole had trailed the man through the stops he made, always heading toward Andy's home range.

Was it all to come to nothing tonight when he faced this hired gun? Was this trip and his life to be bought so cheap, and Andy's death to remain unavenged?

His face hardened suddenly, as a man stepped out of the Staghorn and turned to face him. Still watching him, Cole loosened his gun in its holster. He faced the dying sun, a disadvantage, and tugged his hatbrim lower to shield his eyes from the slanting rays. He had to get this over, he thought, before the sun dropped any lower, and he began walking toward the man with even, measured steps.

The gunman stood spread-legged in midstreet. "Knapp! You hear me now. It's been a long time. Too long. Mebbe you knew I'd find you. I reckon that's why you quit running."

Cole said wearily, "What's the story? It must be a good one. You're not about to admit you were hired to kill me."

"Hired?" The man feigned his surprise well. "Nobody hired me, Knapp. You know that as well as I do." He turned his head toward the crowd that had gathered in front of the Staghorn. "He's got reason for saying I was hired, but he's lying. I had a sister. I followed this Knapp an' her for a thousand miles. After I found her grave I followed Knapp. Now I've got him because he got tired of running."

That was the story, simple and believable. The murmur of indignation that rose from the crowd told Cole they believed it. If they did, wouldn't Sidonie believe it, too? And Janet? And Ben Davis? Now that it was too late, he wished he hadn't been so closemouthed with Janet and Ben. He wished, too, that he'd told Sidonie the truth before this happened. Whatever the outcome of the impending gunfight, the story would be all over the country by sunup.

Cole's face darkened with anger. He shouted, "You're a liar! You never followed me a mile and as far as I know, you never had a sister. Keldson's blood money is starting this fight."

The gunman was hardly more than a youngster, tall and slender, with a week's growth of downy blonde whiskers covering his face, indicating that he'd been on the trail for days. He looked the part of an outraged brother. More than that, he acted the part and he'd be believed.

But Cole saw something else in him. He saw the lust to kill in his eyes; he saw the predatory set of the thin mouth. He saw swagger and pride in his speed and ability; he saw assurance and no fear at all.

The gunman moved forward like a stalking panther, right hand splayed near the butt of his tied-down gun. He said, without taking his eyes from Cole, "Any fool can call another man a liar, but everybody here can tell I'm not."

Cole asked unexpectedly, "How old are you?" and the question brought a flush to the gunman's face, a little more wildness into his eyes. Crowding, Cole went on, "That's far enough. Stand still, sonny, and tell the folks you lied. Tell 'em Keldson hired you to kill me. Tell 'em that and I'll let you go. Then you go find Keldson and tell him not to send a boy to do a man's job."

There was no more talk in the gunman. Only blind fury remained. Cole had touched his one raw spot, deliberately. Cole felt his

nerves and muscles go tight with the waiting.

The gunman's hand closed on the butt of his gun. As the gun came out, his thumb flipped back the hammer, and the barrel began to rise.

Cole's arm, hand and shoulder moved with practiced grace. His gun was level before the sights of the gunfighter's had raised above Cole's knees. His border training took over, and his bullet smashed into the man's chest and drove him back. Cole's second bullet caught him above the heart before he could fall.

Cole swung his head to look at Rhodes who still stood in the stable door. He said bitterly, "What are your orders *now*, deputy? Didn't Keldson give you any, being so sure I'd be dead?"

Rhodes was white, scared, and he backed a step before the fury in Cole's eyes. Cole turned to Judge Benson standing in the crowd before the saloon. "You saw it, Judge. What's the verdict?"

"Self-defense," Benson said reluctantly. "The deceased drew first." He stepped into the street and looked down briefly at the gunman's face, then swung his glance to Cole. "What do you want, Knapp? More dead men in the streets?"

Cole said, "At least one more. Maybe two. Dead men ain't anything new in Cedar, are they? What about Bud Davis?"

"Nobody knew who did it," Benson said quickly. "If we'd known, we'd have made him pay."

"Would you, Judge? Would you really?" He was rewarded by the flush of shame that rose in Benson's cheeks, by the anger that glittered in his eyes.

Cole wearily holstered his gun and turned away. He went into the Staghorn for a drink, and then walked slowly toward the Davis house.

JANET called to him, "Supper's ready, Mr. Knapp."

Ben Davis was on the porch scrubbing pitch off his hands. As Cole came out to wash, Ben said, "How do you feel, son? Low? Killin' always does that to a man."

Cole said, "So you've heard already?"

"Yep. Heard his yarn, too."

Cole said bitterly, "I never saw him before in my life, and I never traveled a thousand miles with any woman, his sister or anyone else."

Davis punched him in the ribs. "Hold on. Hold on, son. You don't have to convince me or Janet."

"How about the others? What about Sidonie? Reckon she'll believe it?"

"Why not? She don't know you like I do." He rubbed a mole on the side of his face, studying Cole. "This goin' to change anything? You fixin' to quit?"

"No, but I've got to see Sidonie tomorrow. I've got to explain. I've waited too long already."

Cole was up before dawn, foregoing breakfast in order to be on Triangle Mesa by the time the sun was up.

Now, again, he took up his vigil, but bad luck stayed with him all day. Sidonie did not appear.

But the next day, Saturday, his patience at an end, he rode boldly in to Anchor and asked for the girl. Zelda opened the door only long enough to say, "She's not here, and I wouldn't let you see her if she was." She shut the door in his face and he heard the bolt slam home.

Normally Cole was not indecisive, but in regard to Sidonie he was. He knew she would have heard the story of the gunman's death. He had found her wary up to now, even unfriendly. If he talked to her, it must be when no one else was present. It was the only way he could win her over. Besides, she was the one person to whom he would tell the story of his friendship for Andy, and of Andy's death.

He considered writing her a letter, asking her to see him, but discarded the idea immediately, knowing he could not be sure the letter would be delivered to her. Could it be that Sidonie was a virtual prisoner on Anchor? He had to admit the possibility.

Riding back to town, Cole met the homesteader, Dick Walters, who pulled up and motioned for him to stop. It was the first friendly gesture the man had made, and Cole was surprised by it. He halted, and for a moment Walters sat slumped in his saddle, a

touch of reserve in his eyes.

"Looks like I pegged you wrong, Knapp," Walters said finally. "When I met up with you the night the Regulators chased the Carew girl, I figured you for another damn gunslinger Keldson had fetched to the country. I was wrong."

"You were," Cole agreed. "Whether you knew it or not, we've been on the same side all along."

"I know that now," Walters admitted sheepishly. "I found it out the next day when Marty worked you over. Mind you, I ain't apologizin' for not sidin' you. There was only Herb Pomeroy an' me against the whole Anchor crew. We couldn't have helped you. We'd only have hurt ourselves."

Cole realized this was true. He asked, "Is Keldson any different from old Bill Carew?"

"Plenty. Bill was tough, but he had a stoppin' place. Keldson ain't got any. That's why the rest of us are so damned scared. We ain't sold out to him yet, but reckon we will. Ain't no other way, as long as Keldson's alive."

"Don't sell yet," Cole said quickly. "Maybe you won't have to. But I need more time."

"How much time? How much? We all got letters from Keldson saying we had a week to take the offer he made us about a month ago. Dunno what his scheme is, but he's got tomething up his sleeve." Walters stared at the Carew's monstrous stone house on the mesa. His expression was bitter, as though he had reached the end of his string.

Cole asked, "Anything else on your mind, Walters?"

"Nothin' else," Walters mumbled. But then he straightened, and his gaze lay steadily on Cole's face. "Yes, there was somethin' else." He swallowed with difficulty, and then went on humbly, "I know what I am, and I ain't overly proud of it. Bud's pa, Ben Davis, says we're just a bunch of talk'n' spit men, an' he's sure right. When Bud was alive we leaned on him. Maybe we would have followed him if it came to a fight. But right now we ain't goin' nowhere. Can't agree on nothin'. What I really stopped you for was to ask if you'd take Bud's place. You ain't afraid of Keldson. I seen that the day he beat you up."

Cole said gently, "I came here to do a job. I won't leave till it's done. I can use your help as much as you can use mine."

WALTERS was silent a moment, his eyes fixed on Cole. There was elation in the man, but there was reserve, too, as though he sought to measure the integrity that was in Cole Knapp. At last he said, "The Regulators are havin' a meetin' at my place Monday night. You be there. By that time we'll know what Keldson's schemin' to do."

Cole rode into town and left his horse at the livery stable, finding Dusty Rhodes there. He took the reins from Cole, saying with grudging admiration, "Found out the name of that gunslinger you shot. Dakota Ed Sanders. Had a big reputation up north."

"Man can make a reputation any of a dozen ways," Cole said.

Rhodes blurted, "Next time it'll be Duke Le Clair. You ain't gonna find him so easy." He halted abruptly, realizing what he'd said.

Cole grinned, but there was an edge to his voice. "Gave yourself away that time, Dusty." Suddenly angered, he seized the deputy's arm. "Mister, you've pussy footed around doing Anchor's chores long enough. If it wasn't for yahoos like you and the Judge, this country wouldn't be in the shape it's in. Let me tell you something. Keldson's going to die. The day he does, you'd better be damned hard to find."

Rhodes jerked free and led the horse toward his stall. Cole left the stable, aware of the futility of putting pressure on Rhodes. The man was a rabbit. He'd talk, all right, but he wouldn't be able to tell Cole anything he didn't already know.

At supper that night Cole told Janet and Ben Davis about meeting Dick Walters on the road.

"You've brought this thing to a head," Ben said. "You're the cockleburr under Keldson's saddle. You watch your step. Maybe you're the key. Maybe he's allowin' a week to drygulch you, knowin' if he gets you the Regulators will fold. He damned near had 'em when you showed up."

Janet gave Cole a shaky smile. "I want you to stay alive. I'm afraid for you. You're so competent, and you don't know what it is to

be afraid for yourself. I keep remembering Bud was that way. And Bud's dead."

Davis added cryptically. "This is Saturday night."

Suddenly Cole knew what was in their minds. This was Saturday night and the whole Anchor crew would be in town. They were trying to tell him he should stay inside, like a rabbit hiding in his hole.

"Thanks for worrying about me," he said gently, "but I had no intention of hunting for trouble in the Staghorn. The pressure's on Keldson, not me."

He got up and went out through the door. Davis was on the front porch, his rocking chair making a steady, squeaking sound. Cole sat down and leaned against a post, enjoying the moment of evening quiet.

A BOY appeared out of the darkness to stand in the shaft of lamplight that fell through the open doorway. He said hesitantly, "I'm lookin' for Mr. Knapp."

Cole had seen the boy around town. He said, "You've found him."

The boy backed a step, his gaze fastening itself on Cole with awe. He said, "Mr. Keldson gave me four bits to tell you he wanted to see you. He's yonder at the bridge—alone. Said to tell you he just wants to talk."

The boy whirled and ran, and the sound of his steps died in the direction of the bridge. Davis leaned forward, laying a hand on Cole's shoulder. "Don't go. It's a trap." He paused, then he said, "That was wasted breath, wasn't it?"

Cole nodded.

Davis said, "Damn it, chances are there's a dozen of 'em there. They'll cut you down."

"Not in the dark. I told you Keldson's feeling the pressure. I'm going to find out just how jumpy he is."

He got up and loosened his gun in the holster. He walked toward the bridge. Halfway there, he slowed and angled toward the creek.

In the damp grass along the bank his feet were silent. He moved slowly and carefully until he made out Keldson's bulky shape beside the bridge. He waited a full minute, probing the darkness with his eyes. Satisfied that Keldson was alone, he said, "I'm here, Keldson."

Keldson jumped. "You damn Indian! I didn't hear you."

"Didn't aim for you to. What's on your mind?"

"Talk. You got me wrong, Knapp. It's time I was setting you right."

"Like you did in the Staghorn, maybe?"

"That was a mistake. I figured you were a gunslick the Regulators hired to get me. Now I know I was wrong. A hired gun wouldn't have hung around after taking the beating you got."

Cole smiled in the darkness. This was a twist. Walters had figured Cole was a gunman imported by Anchor. He said, "So?"

"Just wanted you to know how it is with Anchor. We're fighting for our life. Everybody's against us, because we're big. Hell, it ain't a crime to be big, Knapp, but I say folks are against us. That's why we've got to keep on getting bigger. They'll chew us up if we don't."

Cole waited, silent.

Keldson said, "I'm going to hold Anchor together and I don't care what it costs. I ain't giving up a blade of grass to nobody."

Cole said warily, "Go on."

"I make it a point to know where every damned man in the country stands. I want to know where you stand and what you're doing here."

"My business. Anything else?"

"I'm looking out for Sidonie's interests. If you're here to hurt her—"

"I'm not."

Keldson was silent, and it seemed to Cole he could feel the anger growing in the big man. Keldson demanded, "Then why are you here?"

"You worry about that, Keldson."

For a moment Keldson stood there, his breathing a rasping sound that was audible even about the rush of water in the stream beneath the bridge. Suddenly he wheeled and strode away, his boots hammering on the plank floor of the bridge. Turning his head, Cole saw Ben Davis a few feet behind him, almost hidden by the willows. Starshine glinted on the barrel of a shotgun Davis held.

"What the hell, Ben?"

Davis laid a hand on his arm. "Wait," he whispered. "Watch over yonder."

They waited, and presently three men appeared from the willows on the other side of the bridge. They took the street toward town. Davis said, "I told you it was a trap. Had you come walkin' along past where they was, they'd have sprung it."

Walking back, Davis said, "I heard most of the talk. You know something, boy. And Keldson knows you know. He'll never let you go."

"You've got that wrong, Ben," Cole said. "I'll never let him go."

SOME time after midnight, Ben Davis shook Cole by the shoulder. "Janet's time's come," he whispered hoarsely. "She's two weeks early, but it's come."

Cole fumbled on the stand beside the bed, found a match and thumbed it into life. He lighted the lamp, sat up, and yawned. Suddenly the significance of what Davis had said got through his sleep-fogged mind.

Cole pulled on his pants, asking, "How much time have we got?"

He realized his hands were shaking, something they never did.

"I dunno," Davis answered. "Hell, I never had no babies. I mean, we had Bud, but I wasn't even home when he came."

"We'll get somebody," Cole said. "I'll fetch the doc. Janet'll have to have a woman, too. You tell me who to get and I'll get her."

"Doc'll be drunk," Davis said, "and there ain't a woman in town who'd come. Keldson's passed the word. Nobody'll have nothin' to do with us."

Cole buckled on his gun. "Make some coffee. Strong and black. I'll get Doc here if I have to drag him."

The door of the doctor's office was open, and lamplight fell through it into the hall. Cole breathed a sigh of relief. Doc was up and awake, so maybe it wouldn't be too bad. But when Cole stepped through the doorway and looked at the doctor, he knew it was bad.

[*Turn to page 108*]

ADVERTISEMENT

Do We Have To Die?

Forty-three years ago in forbidden Tibet, behind the highest mountains in the world, a young journalist named Edwin J. Dingle found the answer to this question. A great mystic opened his eyes. A great change came over him. He realized the strange power that knowledge gives.

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Within ten years, he was able to retire to this country with a fortune. He had been honored by fellowships in the world's leading geographical societies, for his work as a geographer. And today, 43 years later, he is still so athletic capable of so much work, so young in appearance, it is hard to believe he has lived so long.

As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this paper a 9,000-word treatise. He says the time is here for it to be released to the Western World, and offers to send it, free of cost or obligation to sincere readers of this notice. In addition he will give to each of them a 64-page book showing the astonishing events the world may soon expect, according to great prophecies.

For your free copy of both works, simply send a postcard or letter to The Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. A-569, Los Angeles 4, Calif.

Holt was on his feet beside his desk, a whisky bottle in his hand. He was tired, his clothes were dirty. He stared at Cole blearily as though he had never seen him before.

Cole said harshly, "Get your bag, Doc. Janet Davis is having her baby."

"I'm not going anywhere," Doc said thickly and defiantly. I just got back from Stony Crest. A rock fell on a man and busted him all to hell. I'm beat. I'm going to bed."

"Not now, Doc." Cole picked up the black bag from the desk and grabbed Holt by the shoulder. "You're going to deliver Janet's baby. Come on."

Holt stared blearily at Cole, seeming to understand there would be no argument. He sighed and started out of his office, lurching from side to side. Cole's right hand steadied him with a firm grip on his coat collar. He fell twice and both times Cole yanked him to his feet and pushed him on. By the time they reached the Davis house, Holt was moving steadily and under his own power.

As they went inside, they could hear Janet moaning. The doctor straightened up, stripped off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. He gripped an edge of the table for a minute, and then began to wash.

He was thorough. Cole gave him credit for that. When he was through, he dried his hands and turned to Ben. "Keep the fire going," he said. "I need plenty of hot water. I'll go to her now, and you bring me plenty of cloths."

As Ben rummaged for old linen, Cole said, "She's got to have a woman. Who'll I get?"

"Nobody. I told you nobody'd come."

"I'll get Judge Benson's wife. She's your neighbor."

"That old biddy wouldn't come. No use askin'."

"I'll get her," Cole said, and left the house.

The Benson house was on the same side of the creek as the Davis place. Dawn was beginning to show above the mountains to the east when Cole jerked the bell pull. He waited a few seconds, than yanked again and again. At last he saw a light and heard someone moving inside the house.

Another minute passed before the door opened. Judge Benson stood there with a lamp in his hand. "What do you want?" he snarled. "Say it and get going."

"I want your wife. Janet Davis is having her baby, and she needs a woman to take care of her."

"Damn you, do you think my wife would—"

Cole took a step toward Benson and looked him straight in the eyes. "Judge, isn't there any decency left in Cedar? Isn't there anyone who feels like a human being? Or has all your humanity run down a gopher hole because you're scared of what Marty Keldson might do?"

Benson didn't answer. His lips moved, but no words came. Cole said, "I've listened to Janet tonight, Judge. She's suffering. She needs help, and she's going to get it. It's as much your fault her husband's dead as it is Keldson's. Yours and Dusty Rhodes and everybody else's in this stinking, yellow town. Now go get your wife before I lose my temper."

The Judge turned and disappeared into the rear of the house. He returned a few moments later with his wife, a tall, angular woman who did not so much as nod a greeting to Cole. She went out through the door into the pale dawn light with Cole following. Reaching the Davis house, she entered and went at once into Janet's bedroom.

Ben Davis was sitting in a chair, grinning like a little boy. He looked up at Cole, still grinning, but with a kind of wonder in his eyes. "It's a boy, Cole, the dangedest little red-faced mite you ever seen. Got all his toes an' fingers, too."

Cole grinned back at the little man. Tension rushed out of him like a flood. He felt good, now that it was over. He said, "That's fine, Ben. Real fine."

Davis looked at him, his face turning grave. "Cole, I ain't much for words, but mebbe you know how I feel. Thanks. I dunno what we'd of done tonight if it wasn't for you."

"Forget it. You hear?" Cole swallowed and sat down. He felt, for the first time, that he'd accomplished something in Cedar.

SIDONIE CAREW sat with her stepmother in the ornate parlor, only half listening to Zelda's talk about her son.

STRANGE RIDER

Sidonie was thinking about Cole Knapp. She was aware that Cole has been on Anchor range. She had found two different spots, both with a view of Anchor buildings, where cigarette butts showed that a man had waited.

She was sure it must be Cole, and she wondered if he had been watching her. If he was, why? She could not think of an answer.

Zelda suddenly interrupted her preoccupation with a direct question. "Sidonie, when are you and Marty going to be married?"

She hesitated a moment before she answered. "I just don't love him, Zelda. I won't marry a man I don't love."

Zelda leaned forward, not at all willing to give up and now strangely intense. "Why not set a date? Now! I'll tell Marty when he comes in tonight. It would make him very happy. It would make me happy, too."

Sidonie stared at her incredulously. "Zelda, Marty is a grown man, not a little boy! He's old enough to speak for himself. Do you think I want a husband whose mother does his proposing for him?"

Color rushed into Zelda's face, and anger touched her mouth. "He has proposed and you've always put him off." She swallowed. "If it wasn't for the ranch—"

Suddenly Sidonie was angry, too. "Do you mean that if it weren't for the ranch, Marty wouldn't want to marry me? Is that what you almost said?"

"Of course not," Zelda said easily, her composure returning. "I meant that if it wasn't for the ranch, there'd be no hurry about your marrying Marty. But Anchor's in trouble, whether you know it or not. The way it is, Marty's risking his life for property that belongs to you. But if you were married, it would be his, too. His and yours."

Sidonie set her jaw firmly but did not reply.

Zelda's voice was still quiet, still deadly, when she said, "Stubbornness, my dear, is one thing neither Marty nor I will stand. You *will* marry him, you know. Bud Davis found out what stubbornness does to Marty. So did Cole Knapp. The others will find out in a few days, too, as soon as Marty gets done at Stony Crest—"

[*Turn page*]

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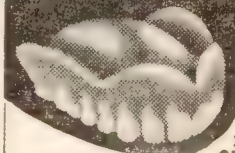

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She halted abruptly, as though realizing she had said too much. She softened immediately and touched Sidonie's arm with her hand. "Let's not quarrel, dear. Your father's gone, and Andy will never come back. We don't have anyone but each other. And Marty."

Sidonie stood staring at her stepmother. Stony Crest, as she knew, was the name given an outcropping of rock at the northeast corner of Triangle Mesa. It lay between Coroner Creek and Big Horse Creek. At this point the two streams ran less than a hundred yards apart before they separated again to flow on both sides of Triangle Mesa. Big Horse ran through the meadows of the Regulators and the town of Cedar. Coroner Creek watered Anchor's hay meadows on the other side of the mesa.

"What did you mean about Stony Crest?" Sidonie asked.

Zelda, unreasonably agitated, rose from her chair.

Sidonie repeated, sharply this time, "What did you mean about Stony Crest?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all." Abruptly, Zelda turned and went upstairs.

PUZZLED, Sidonie watched her go. Then, deeply troubled by what Zelda had said and by her question that had gone unanswered, she left the house and crossed the yard to the barn. She bridled and saddled quickly and rode out.

She lifted the mare into an easy canter, rode northeast toward the point of rock that was called Stony Crest.

Sidonie had not gone more than half a mile when she heard the hoofs of a running horse behind her. She turned her head to see Cole riding toward her.

Fright touched her briefly. Then she reined in to wait as he raised his hand to wave. In spite of all she had been told, in spite of the things she knew he had done, she realized that she had nothing to fear from Cole Knapp.

He pulled up, took off his hat, and smiled at her. He said, "I've been wanting to talk to you."

"I know," she said coolly. "I've seen a couple of places where you waited."

He dismounted and stood looking up at her. "I wanted to talk to you about your brother. Andy was my friend." He paused a moment. "He's dead, Sidonie."

"I guess I knew he must be," she said slowly. "I can't cry for him any more." She slid off her horse. "All right, I'll listen."

"And I hope you'll believe me," said Cole, "because you're in danger just as Andy was. Anchor is a big stake, Sidonie, and Marty Keldson wants it. Maybe his mother does, too. They know Andy's dead, because they arranged it. If you were dead, or if you married Marty, they'd have Anchor."

She was leaning against her mare, saying nothing, looking away from him.

"I don't think you realize what kind of man Keldson is," Cole went on. "There wasn't a woman who'd help Janet when she had her baby. I finally had to threaten the Judge before he'd send Mrs. Benson over. Ben said there wasn't any use asking her or anyone else. He said Keldson had passed the word to leave the Davises alone."

She put a hand to her throat. She was sick at the thought of this—that because of Marty's threats, the women of Cedar were afraid to help Janet Davis, Janet who had lost her husband because of Marty's vicious greed. But she was the key to his greed. If she married him—or if he killed her—he would get Anchor.

Suddenly they both heard the hammering beat of a horse's hoofs. "Keldson!" Cole said, and swore under his breath.

Keldson slid his horse to a halt and hit the ground running, his face livid with rage. His eyes were ugly, his face twisted. "So this is why you won't marry me! You've been meeting him in the brush all this time!"

Anger more than fear was in her. She said, "I won't be spoken to like that. Get back to Anchor before I do something you'll be sorry for."

He laughed, a nasty grating sound without humor. "Aren't you the high and mighty one? Listen, girl. I'm going to beat this drifter so he can't walk. You're the one who'll be getting on a horse and heading for Anchor."

He had always shown her some deference, some courtesy, but now she saw only rage and hate. He looked at her as if he despised her.

Then she was more furious than she had ever been in her life. She said, "You think you can beat him without having your men hold him? You don't need to try. You're through at Anchor. I want you and Zelda out of the house by sundown. I'll have your things sent wherever you want."

For an instant Marty looked as if he didn't comprehend what she'd said. Then he threw back his great head and laughed.

Cole touched her arm. "Go home. This is between us. His eyes were angry, his mouth grim, but she felt a gentleness in him for all of that. And suddenly, inexplicably, she trusted him.

She climbed to her saddle and turned her horse toward Anchor. She did not look back. But before she had gone a hundred yards she heard the tremendous sounds of their coming together behind her.

Fear such as she had never known turned her body cold. How would Anchor's trouble end? How many more people would be hurt or killed before it all was settled?

FOR AN INSTANT the heads of both men were turned, watching the girl ride away. Then, from the corner of his eye, Cole caught Keldson's movement. He swung his head warily.

As they stared at each other, both men seemed to have forgotten their guns. And suddenly Cole charged.

Savagely, as fearlessly as a wolverine, he closed with Keldson, his teeth slightly bared, his lips drawn away from them in a delighted grin. He feinted with his right, and when Keldson came in to follow up, smashed him solidly in the mouth with a hard left hand.

Keldson's head snapped back, and now Cole laid his right on with all the power of his shoulders behind it. It spread Keldson's nose like a ripe grape, and left it broken and bloody when Cole drew his fist back.

Keldson let out a sound that resembled the enraged bellow of a tormented bull. His great fists swung, and now Cole made no effort to avoid them, concentrating instead on seeing that every blow he threw at Keldson landed and punished the man. They stood spraddle-

[*Turn page*]

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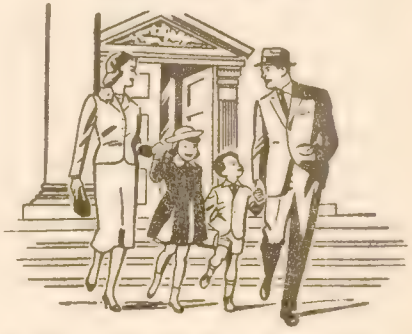

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legged and traded punch for punch. On and on, they fought savagely.

Cole loved each shock of pain that passed along his arm as the bones of his hands met the bone of Keldson's face. He shook his head whenever one of Keldson's mighty fists stunned him, but still he bore in.

Keldson fell, and Cole staggered, losing his own footing. Then they fought on their knees. Cole knocked Keldson flat with such force that he fell across him.

Angered at his own tiredness, Cole put forth a mighty surge of will and got to his feet. At the same moment, Keldson groaned, drew in a rasping breath and stood up too.

Cole knew it was this moment or never for him to move in for the kill, feeling nothing but the overpowering need to destroy this man. He drew his right back, lifted his shoulder and drove his whole body forward to give impetus to his driving bloody fist.

The blow landed squarely between Keldson's eyes, and they fell together in a heap upon the ground.

It was fully a minute before Cole could move. Then he got up slowly, by inches. He could not have said how long it took him to find his horse, how long he groped for his saddle before he struggled up into it.

He started back toward Anchor, but he had not gone far until he saw a cloud of dust, made by nearly a dozen riders. It raised a warning that registered immediately in Cole's mind. Instantly he reined aside into a gully, where he waited until they thundered by.

Danger seemed to have cleared his head, seemed to have given his battered body renewed strength. He gouged his horse's sides and clung to the saddle as the horse moved on again.

Cole knew that if the Anchor riders found him today, he was dead. Nothing, not Sidonie, not Ben Davis, not the Regulators, could save him.

So he ran now like a hunted beast toward Cedar, and he was lucky because he reached the road that led off the mesa before he heard their returning hoofbeats behind him.

Though he did not know it, they had no thought for him, but only for their boss. Two of them went back to Anchor for a buckboard. The others stayed with Keldson, wondering at the man who had done this, wondering, too, if Keldson would live.

Cole stopped at the bridge in town and fell from his saddle. He crawled to the creek and plunged his face and upper body into the cool water. Revived, he got to his feet, but he did not expend the energy necessary to mount. Instead, he walked until he came to the Davis house.

BEN MUST have seen him coming, for he ran out and took the reins of Cole's horse. Cole staggered onto the porch and went on through the door. He started across the parlor toward his room, then stopped. Sidonie stood in the kitchen doorway, her eyes wide with horror, but filled with tears as well.

Cole tried to grin. He said gently, "I didn't lose. Not this time."

"What about Marty?" Sidonie asked. "Did you kill him?"

"No."

"What are you doing here?" Cole asked.

Her eyes were defiant. "I've left Anchor."

"Why?"

Anger touched her briefly. "Because I will no longer lend my name and my father's name to the things Marty Keldson is doing. Anchor has become a greedy, warring kingdom instead of a ranch. I won't go back as long as Marty and Zelda are there and right now I don't know how to get them off."

Tired as he was, Cole grinned approval. He looked at Davis. "What do you know about that, Ben?"

But Davis was frankly hostile. "Don't like it," he growled. "Don't like it worth a damn. It's another of Keldson's sneaky tricks."

Cole glanced at Sidonie. No anger showed in her face, because of Davis' lack of trust. She said wearily, "I can't blame you for not trusting me, but the trouble you've had is Anchor's fault. I just thought I could help until Janet is on her feet again."

"Sounds like a good idea to me, Ben," Cole said. "She'll be a sight more cheerful to look at than Benson's sour-faced wife."

Davis snorted. But he conceded reluctantly. "Maybe so."

Cole looked at Sidonie. "You stay. He's grumpy, but his heart's pure gold." He

grinned at the way Davis' face flushed at that.

Sidonie said, "It's the least I can do. I'm almost sure Marty killed your son, Mr. Davis."

"Knew it all the time. So did everybody else, I reckon, but you."

"I've been blind, but I'm seeing a few things now."

"High time."

Cole got up, holding to the back of the chair. He said, "You two fight it out. I'm going to bed."

(To be continued in the next issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 78)

1. Barbary sheep.
2. Whimper.
3. Arizona.
4. Two reins.
5. Washington.
6. Taos is pronounced "Touse" to rhyme with "house."
7. Scout.
8. No. The black powder used in old-time firearms made a lot of smoke. The nitroglycerine base smokeless powder of modern ammunition makes practically no smoke at all.
9. Young.
10. Jug-head, buzzard-head, crock-head, churn-head, hammer-head, punkin-head, nut-head, jerk-head, mutton-head, bull-head, hog-head, bone-head, chucklehead, brittle-head, etc.

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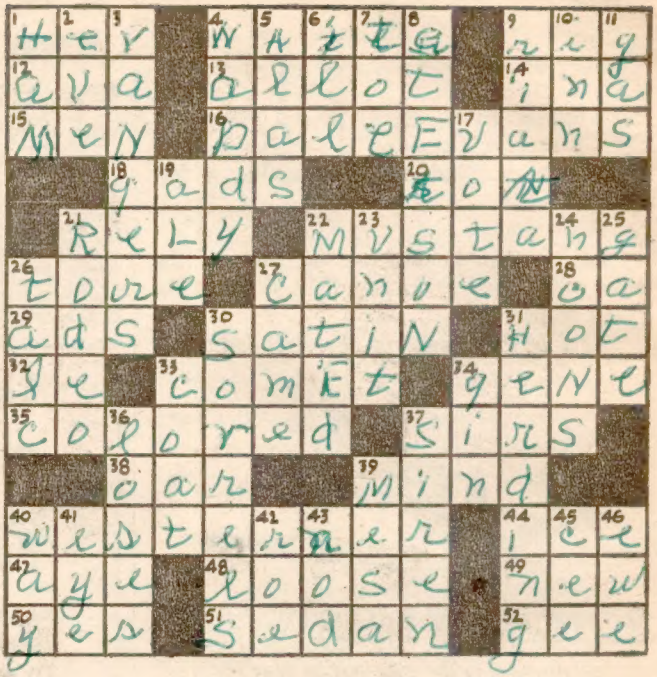
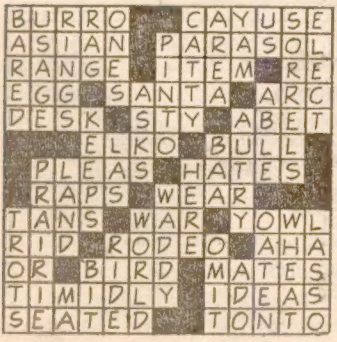


The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Feminine pronoun
4 Serves at table
9 Horse and buggy
12 Miss Gardner, actress
13 To apportion
14 Miss Claire, actress
15 Cowboys
16 Mrs. Roy Rogers
18 Wanders about
20 Small child
21 To depend
22 Half-wild horse
26 Ripped
27 Indian's boat
28 On account (abbr.)
29 Advertisements (colloq.)
30 Glossy fabric
31 Very warm
32 French article
33 Heavenly body
34 ——— Autry, cowboy
35 Having color
37 Gentlemen
38 Rowing implement
39 To obey
40 Native of the West
44 Frozen water
47 Affirmative vote
48 Unattached
49 Modern
50 Word of assent
51 Closed car
52 Golly



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

DOWN

1 Sandwich meat
2 Adam's mate
3 Texas mounted police
4 Cowboy
5 Alack
6 Not well
7 Part of the foot
8 Rancher's hat
9 Lariat
10 Tavern
11 Cooking fuel
17 To cast a ballot
19 A drink like beer
21 Cowboy exhibition
22 Matched
23 Standard amount
24 Lunch-time periods
25 Fence opening
26 Baby powder
27 Arrived
30 Reddish-brown horses
31 Tending cattle
33 Outer garment
34 Cocktail ingredient
36 Mislays
37 Police-car sound
39 Western plateau
40 Route
41 Organ of sight
42 Fish eggs
43 To incline the head
45 Third letter
46 Female sheep

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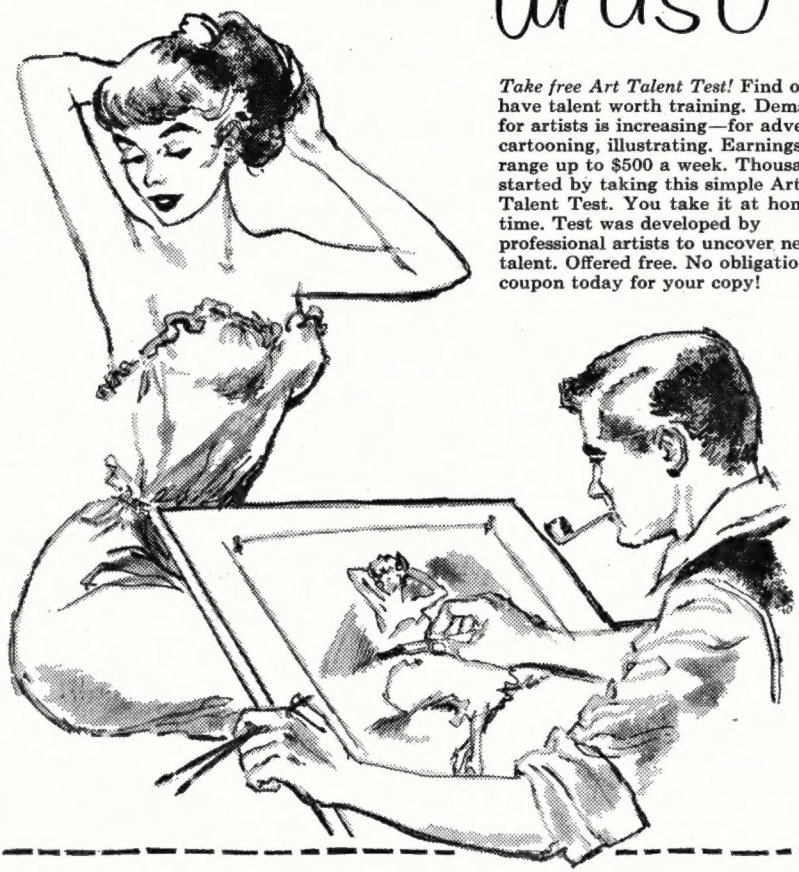

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